stars in Ur teeth

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by ghostyplasma

Summary

"'I've never really liked fiction.' Adam blurts out, barely pausing for breath. 'I feel like it's hard to imagine what the author is trying to convey if everything isn't in very great detail, and- and whenever it *is* in great detail, it's always extremely boring and so far beyond the point of mattering in regard to what the story is trying to teach you.'"

or,

Adam goes to a new bar with Beth and her two good friends, and ends up scrambled into a situation he can't quite chew the fat off of.

Notes

making up words like my life depends on it

tw / important spoiler: this is heavily (for now) Beth/Adam for the purpose of storytelling. it does also have one short scene at the end with non-nsfw non-con.

in any case, please enjoy my exploration of beth + adam's relationship iiiin conjunctioooon wiiiith him meeting nigel. k thx!

Chapter 1

A three-point knock on his door. Adam tests his grin out in the mirror, fixing the collar of his shirt before he makes his way to swing the door open.

“Hello, Beth!”

“Hi Adam,” she chirps, arms open wide to a hug he gives her just as eagerly. She pets through his hair once with sharp, well-manicured nails, pressing a barely-there kiss to his temple that he tries repeating back to her. “All ready to go?”

It’s the lipgloss, by the way— he doesn’t like the lipgloss. Too sticky. But the air-kisses she gives him instead in an attempt at compromise never fails to make Adam grin. He’d had to get over that sharp, annoying smooching noise of it at first, but he much prefers it over having sticky, unremovable, glittery goop on his skin.

“I think so,” he says, stepping back for her approval. “How do I look?”

His arms hang out and away from his body as he does an awkward little turn for her. He puts them down when he faces Beth again, but his hands and fingers still fidget nervously at his sides.

Overall though, he paints a very cute picture. His hair is wet-combed and lightly gelled, with a fresh shave during his shower doing well to brighten up his face. Dark, deep gray slacks of a nice material cling to his thighs and fall down to rich brown dress shoes with the scuffs shined expertly out. Beth smiles back at him, flashing a perfect row of bright teeth, and clicks forward to grab for his tie.

“Lose this, then I think you’re golden.” Beth answers softly. His fingers meet hers at the knot. They pull it loose together, heat building up behind his neck at their sudden proximity. He’s wrapped up in the sweet scent of her perfume, an expensive gift from her father, and distantly listens to the satiny hiss of his tie being whisked away from around his neck. Beth tosses it to the corner armchair, and the urge to return it back to its place in the closet is a strong one.

He’s immediately redirected, however, when Beth’s quick fingers start making work on his shirt’s buttons. His hands meet over hers again, confusion blooming up on his face.

“I- I thought we had to leave— right now?”

“We do,” she confirms piously, patting his upper chest once she’s finished unleashing two tortoise-shell buttons from their homes. “We *are*, we are, we are. Just wanted to, you know, show a little collarbone.”

Her shoulder raises a few times at her cheekiness, and he mirrors the little grin she shines on him. “You look perfect, Adam.” She stresses, stepping back to take him in again. She moves to take his hand in hers, a moment of overt tenderness taking over her, before she starts leading him towards the open door.

“Come on, let’s go! Megan’s been *dying* to see you!”

Adam stumbles out alongside her without grabbing his coat, and he wonders all the way down the stairs on whether that was a mistake.

They order a cab when they get down to the steps outside, and soon enough, they’re being carted through the city towards *The Orbit!*

“When the girls and I went *last year*,” Beth starts off, voice over-loud and excitable in the small space of the car, “Adam, it totally *sucked*! The service was so bad, you could sit at the bar for an entire hour and not get a drink! Music was *horrible*, very 2000s and,” she grimaces, shuddering, “not even in a good way.”

Shaking her head again, Beth settles back into her seat and whips her hair to the side when going to glance out the window. It wisps Adam in the face a little, and he passes a hand over his nose and mouth to ease the itchiness. His hand drops in his lap, then moves to the center of the middle seat between them, open and ready for her hand for whenever she realizes it.

“Anyway,” she starts back up after a few moments of silence, “The place got bought out something like, eight, nine, ten months ago? Lauren said it was completely gutted, refurbished, new ownership, so—… It should be something.” She shrugs one shoulder, looking back at Adam with quirked, shiny lips.

He stares at her, at the even-toned and elegant makeup and her perfect, dark hair. She stares back, their eyes locking; great progress after having spent several months working on his direct-eye-contacting skills.

It still sends something like a thrill through Adam, a feeling close to nausea, or fear (adrenaline, maybe?) to stare back into her eyes. Every time he does, he gets the overwhelming feeling that she’s *searching* for something, peeling him back by the layer, trapping him in the never-ending forest of her deep-brown eyes as if she’s always looking to *find* something in his.

Do you understand? They seem to say, *Are we really connecting? Do you really* ***get me***? It turns his stomach inside out almost every time, but… Adam understands the importance of pushing himself for his partner. They’ve had many, many conversations over this.

Her sitting figure flashes between color and shadow with each pass of the car under street lights. He only remembers he’s supposed to respond when she finally grabs for his hand, then. Her fingers are cold, so he wraps them up tight in both of his hands to warm them.

“That’s exciting,” he murmurs back to her with some forced enthusiasm, finally breaking the eye contact to glance down at their cupped hands. He feels the press of sharp nails against his palm. “Can’t wait,” he finishes, and wonders on the way there if those words count as lying.

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When the cab stalls out front of *The Orbit!*, Adam and Beth step out into a cold, lightly drizzling scene. Beth's friends, Megan and Lauren, meet them out front of the wrap-around line in loud, excitable squeaks of total delight. All three girls hug, their mouths running a-mile-a-minute as they grasp onto each other's arms and sway off into a circle with their pealing laughter.

"Did you guys get to pre-game before you left?" Megan asks after she and Lauren give respectable hello's and waves toward a nodding, nervously-smiling Adam.

"Ugh, *no*! I didn't even think about that." Beth defers to Adam then, holding out her hand grabbily toward him. She pulls him in close when she can, miming another close-call kiss to his cheek.

"Adam, would you want to drink a little while we wait in line? It might be a while." She sways off, looking to the milling crowd before staring back at him. Her tone and gaze is sweet, doeish, but for all it's worth it's like hitting a brick wall.

"Ahh," his voice waivers, eyes flickering around. He can hear the music from inside the club blasting out to the curbside. Neon signs in blue, green, hot pink, and orange outline the bar's sign and a large ring reminiscent of Saturn. Curiosity and sudden interest twinges inside him like an internal twitch.

Instead of meeting her eyes, he keeps on scanning ahead. The line is indeed long and wraps around the two story, red-brick building. An overbearing security detail wavers all around, ear pieces and all.

He takes a breath for the first time in twenty-five seconds or so, finally asking, "Do you think we'd get in trouble if we do?"

"Not if we pour it into something else," Megan offers up with a glimmer in her eye. "There's a convenience store right around the corner, I'm sure we can figure something out."

Adam doesn't really want to do that, but he stamps down hard on the urge to say something contrary. It's not even necessarily that he's trying to be on '*best behavior*' or '*cool* for Beth's friends, either.

It's the hand Beth outstretches towards him as she's already crossing the empty, rain-wet street, tossing sugar-warm words behind her shoulder that he doesn't even quite catch. He sits with the feeling in his chest for five seconds, eight, ten before he's surging after them in a long-legged stride to catch up to her steadying hand.

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The convenience store is all harsh lights with the overpowering scent of *Fabuloso!* cloaked around every corner. The deeper they go, the more obvious it is that the chemical aims to mask the smell of mildew, likely overgrown from the past few weeks of New York's heavy rain.

He watches the girls out of the corner of his eye while they all spread out like some practiced S.W.A.T team, picking up snacks to stuff into their tiny purses later and plucking at little bottles of alcohol.

When they all meet at the counter, there's several chasers stacked on the counter, juices and RedBulls to be paired with little tequilas, vodkas, and a few fireballs. A grimace flashes over his face briefly, but he pulls it back quickly enough into a mask of something neutral.

He asks the store clerk when he pulls out his wallet if he's ever thought about trying vinegar and warm water instead, as a cleaner for the mold, but promptly shuts his mouth when he and the girls all give him long, odd looks. The cashier checks them all out quickly with a palpable air of annoyance, eyeing them up and down on their way out.

On their way back to *The Orbit!*, the girls begin ripping open their spoils and tipping back their heads. They drain their little alcohols, coughing and spluttering exaggeratedly and going quickly to chase them down.

"Come on," Beth encourages him, snapping open a little vodka. She takes a deep sip, and Adam watches the motion; glossy lips against the frosted, slim neck of *Grey Goose*. She passes it along to him, pressing the back of her hand against her mouth with a cute little grimace.

"Just a little bit," she says, "then we can get good drinks inside."

Adam understands the act of consuming alcohol before going into a club. It's cheaper in the long run, and it helps soothe your nerves before going into loud and tightly packed spaces. At least, this is what Beth has taught him over time, and although he didn't really like drinking, he can afford to see the effects it's had on him in the past. He's already started feeling a bit frazzled tonight, anxious energy coursing through as he grinds directly against his Saturday night schedule, but he knows deep down that Beth is just looking out for him. *Gray Goose* in hand, he takes a deep breath before plugging his nose internally and finishing off the rest. Beth is just trying to help him unwind, loosen up a little, like she always says. So—

He drinks the other Beth passes his way, a little over half-full this time. His face contorts immediately into a mixture of pain and disgust, and Beth laughs brightly when some dribbles down on his chin. He hisses trying to catch it, breathing a fiery breath in that's immediately uncomfortable, and trying in vain to smear off the alcohol before it can reach his shirt collar.

Beth steps forward to help him, running the back of her slim hand up the side of his throat, then with her palm next against his chin, the corner of his mouth. She steps away to lick it off with a sort of snarky, girlish snicker. Heat blooms in Adam's cheeks at this, as he watches her step deftly back around and stand tall in her black heels. She finishes licking up the side of her wrist, casting a winking glance in Adam's direction.

The dark skirt of her dress blows up a bit in a ripple, and Adam sighs through his nose, going to swipe at his mouth himself. His freshly-shaven face stings a little, and he feels it even more with the way Beth stares at him.

She really is very pretty, and he wishes he could get things right without making a fool of himself all of the time. He warms up again from his own internal struggle when she comes to loop her arm with his, pulling him along to towards the back of the line while her friends lead the way. They all knock back their little bottles and talk animatedly over each other, all-the-while.

They drink more while they wait and talk in line (well- Adam mostly just stands there, looking around mildly and listening to all different parts of conversations happening around them), but he's attentive when asked a direct question, and dutifully takes sips of mixed alcohol when it's passed over to him.

He starts to feel it when they get closer to the front of the line. In his stomach, fire crackles, and with every pump of his heart a feeling of weightlessness moves sluggish through his system. He doesn't drink very often (or, didn't, before he'd met Beth), mostly because it was hard to mask the taste without it being absolutely abhorrent. And— well, because he doesn't like the way it made him feel. Or, *didn't*. But they've drank together so often now, wine during dinners, liquor when they go out, that he finds he doesn't *really* mind it. After all, he has a wider palette for it now, and he can alway muster up enough momentum to say no when he's really enough.

They all get their ID's checked, then wristbanded with a little stamp pressed to the insides of each of their wrists. Adam pays the cover for both he and Beth, and then again for Megan and Lauren when they confess to him, totally embarrassed, that they'd forgotten cash and hadn't realized. It doesn't bother him, they promised to pay him later.

Then, they're all stepping in, and Adam breathes through the physical rattle of his ribcage. He feels it in his spine and in his hips, even the curled fists at each of his sides, and wonders how people could get used to this. The music blasts and pumps through him, decorative lights throwing off around the entryway in blues and greens that have him squinting. Beth takes his hand and pulls him deeper inside, into a tunnel of lights that change color as they walk.

"Oh, that's really cool!" Adam breaks away with a shout. Beth doesn't hear him, but that doesn't really matter. He steps backwards in the tunnel, uncaring for other patrons who are trying to move past him and make their way into the club.

He watches the track of their individual movements, like exploding stars in the shapes of their bodies across a dark, nebulous background. Each panel of the tunnel is outlined in clean LED lights that flash in coordinated patterns of colors.

He nods in deep interest, eyes scanning up and down for cameras or heat sensors that'd feed the information to what had to be custom-made screens. It must be an extremely expensive design, and he finds himself totally enthralled in figuring out what their system is. There are pinpricks of lights encrusted into the tunnel walls like diamonds, and they blink at different, timed intervals. Adam's eyes shine over it, over the crafting and the forethought of it.

Beth is back to his side in no time at all, sliding a hand up his shoulder and ushering him along. They get another round of drinks— shots and cocktails that Adam pulls down without too much trouble, now. He feels light and buzzy, bones and brain vibrating along with the pulse of heavy music or the loud din of conversation all around.

Everyone's skin and clothes are bathed in cobalt blues, deep purples, lime greens, and he can hardly hear Beth and her friends over the roar of other groups' laughter. Once the girls finish their drinks, they express their life-or-death need to head to the dance floor in the other room. Adam lets himself be pulled up from leaning against the bar, their little group making their way in a line past all types of interesting-looking people.

There are those who are dressed with little to the imagination, their skin shining in oil and what must be glittery makeup. To his surprise, as they filter slowly on by, there are Go-Go Dancers set up on platforms in each of the four corners of the room they're leaving. He must've missed them on their way in because there'd been nobody dancing on them just yet.

His eyes tick around, cataloging both men and women with green-painted skin and silver, glittered short-shorts. There were even some moving around the crowd in golden, Greek-themed costume, or dressed as elves, fairies, even mermaids. They seem to all be apart of the staff, moving trays of empty glasses or supplying tables with fresh refills, or heading behind one of the bars to help with the demand. The mix of aesthetics is a little confusing to Adam, but he supposes that they just liked to dress up and have fun.

The dance-floor itself is packed, and Adam braces himself for the hot, damp feeling of people pressing in on or bumping against him. The only one he should be focusing on is Beth, he reminds himself. If he can focus on Beth, he can be just fine.

Then, he realizes that Beth and the girls are no—where in his immediate vicinity. "Beth," the sound slips his mouth, but it's totally swallowed up and eaten by the crowd.

"Hey. Hey, Beth!" he raises his voice, spotting her by the back of her head and narrow shoulders, but he knows that the sound doesn't quite reach her. He tries squeezing his way past people, but everyone seems to close in on the scant spaces he means to move through. It's infuriating, he thinks, but the girls are much shorter than he is, smaller, and they've all been able to snake their way through the crowd with little to no problem.

Adam realizes with a feeling of dread, that every time he steps into a place like this, he sticks out like a sore thumb. Amongst all of these pretty, gyrating people with their shiny outfits, their glittered bodies and sunglasses-indoors, he's reminded that he just isn't *built* for this kind of scene, the loud music and touching people and having enough alcohol inside of him to make him puke.

He waves a hand up when he finally catches Beth looking around (looking for him, he hopes?) and startles in place when their eyes catch. He waves his hand up again, hoping she stays put until he can reach her.

"Stay there! Stay there!" he shouts.

By the time he's squeezed his way through, he's nearly at the center of the floor, blitzed by the lightshow and getting tossed around by dancing friends and embracing couples. He's sweating already, too, messy bangs clinging to his forehead while he turns in a circle, looking for his missing girlfriend.

"I told her to stay there," he says at normal volume, miserable, dread coiling up in his gut to twist. "I told her-" he starts again, lifting up on his toes and spinning to try and catch another glimpse of her. He gets bumped into for a fourth time, steadied by the same hand that'd dealt the blow. He ignores the curling smile and super-sweet "*Sorry!*", ducking down as much as he can to fight his way back through the crowd.

He ends up on the opposite side of the room, and spies a dark hallway with a door at the end of it. A promising red "*Exit*" sign sits up above. Blissful, cool air is promised at the other side of that door, and without another glance back he fights his way to get through. Just before he reaches the outer throngs of other club-goers, someone snatches at his wrist and *yanks*. He yelps abortedly, whipping to see Beth grinning at him with all her white teeth, her eyes wide and shiny and dilated.

"There you are! Come on, they asked us to dance up on the platform, we *have* to go!" She shouts, wrapping her other hand around the same wrist as she pulls him back into the crowd. He follows her unsteadily, body thrumming with alcohol that, in the very least, dulls the panic threatening to undo him. She leads him far into the space, through the throng of sweaty, jumping bodies, to a dark little hallway that starts into metal stairs. The girls are there, tilting their heads into the hand of someone he doesn't know. They scream in excitement when they see him, ushering themselves up and up and up until suddenly, they're all standing on the lifted hangar of the DJ's booth. Below them, an entire room of lit-up, jumping party-goers whoop and holler and crash into each other.

"They want us to dance!" Beth yells for his benefit, stripping off her purse from around her chest and letting it dangle on one shoulder. The girl who lead them up here is with them, too, throwing up her arms and jumping down, down, down with the beat of the music. Adam tries to let his body sway, his senses overwhelmed by the lights and music and booze running through him.

It takes him more than a few minutes of this to try and loosen up, but the girls dance and grab and pull on each other from the front of the hangar, looking for all the world like beautiful, dark, crazed visions. There's a moment when Adam is able to let go of his insecurity, if by just the fraction of a hair, for his arms to hang out straight and let his head hang down. He actively makes himself listen for the beat of the music, the heavy, quick drums and filters the beat from the body moving in fun, jilted, robotic movements. His face scrunches up in a laugh as he swings his head from side to side, pouring with sweat. Adam's curls plaster to his neck and forehead, and for more than a few minutes, he lets himself get caught up in the heat of the moment.

The girls and Adam dance, and it sets the crowd on fire. The DJ spins and mixes, taking a hit of whatever it is that the hostess has to offer. She bumps into Adam's shoulder when propositioning him, too, but he barks out loud a laugh that feels more like panic, shaking his head vigorously with wide, wide eyes. She sways back to the girls, giving them their turns,

and the only thing Adam can do is push down his discomfort and try to lose himself in his flailing dance.

He's not sure how much time has passed, but he does end up holding each girl's purses once he's just about done making a fool of himself. Adam hangs to the back, where the stairs start, more in the shadows as he catches his breath. He tries to wipe the sweat away, but to no avail. It's uncomfortable and he fears what a mess he must look like, but the sight of Beth dipping down low in front of Lauren to squeeze her thighs from a crouch is enough of a distraction to make him shuffle.

When the girls finally have had enough, they file down the stairs with wild grins and excitable laughter. They all want to go outside and smoke cigarettes, then resupply on more drinks. Adam really doesn't want to be around that, so he lies and says he has to go to the bathroom, that he'll meet them outside soon.

They part ways for a fraction, Adam filing in to the restroom where other men piss and leave without washing their hands. He grabs several sheets of paper towels, wetting his face and neck first before scrubbing himself down. He grabs for more paper towels and scrunches it through his wet mop of hair, combing through with his fingers after to try and make it look somewhat decent. All the gel he'd combed into it is limp and tacky by now, but it works well enough to run his fingers through his hair.

When he steps out, the first thing he wants and needs is fresh air. He'd been intercepted the first time, but now Beth and her friends would be on the opposite side of the building, outside and smoking their cigarettes. He looks for the same *Exit* sign he'd seen earlier, nearly tripping over other people's platform shoes in his hurry.

He bleeds out against the back door, sighing his relief at the crisp breeze that hits him. He fans out his shirt a little as he walks outward a few steps, uncuffing and rolling up the sleeves in neat, tight folds til he secures them again with the buttons. He circles back towards the wall, shoulders hitting the brick as he runs his fingers up through his bangs.

In his peripheral, he can see two men standing side by side to his left. They speak to each other in low, conversational tones, bringing their own cigarettes up to their lips between words shared. There's some laughter that makes Adam prickle a little, but he focuses on fishing his phone out.

He pulls up his messages first, going to Beth and hovering over their most recent conversation. Adam had sent her a few images of pigeons with interesting color patterns that he'd seen while passing through the park this last Sunday. She'd hearted each one and replied,

Awww! :) They're so pretty. 💙 which he'd hearted back. Most of their text conversations were dry or purely informational, but every once in a while Adam liked to spice it up.

His ears perk when both men shuffle, the gravel underneath their shoes crunching under their weight. One man, dark-haired and wearing all black, pats the other's shoulder with loud claps before retreating towards Adam, to the door.

Adam tenses, hoping that he doesn't get interrupted from doomscrolling through Twitter right now, but the man just opens the heavy door and files on through. Music scrumps deafeningly for only a moment as the door swings open, gearing to a gentle roar once it hisses shut.

Adam takes a deep breath in. The air is nice and cool and smells fresh with rain, wet asphalt, and car oil. He slips his phone back into his pocket, wondering if he should head back inside and find Beth. Instead, for just a moment, he closes his eyes to just listen, breathe, let his head fall back to thump against the wall.

The flick of scrunching metal makes a muscle in Adam's neck twitch. A soft glow, and then the cloying, sweet smell of marijuana permeates near Adam's senses. A sound leaves the back of his throat, and he pushes himself off the wall to go and take his leave already.

"You looked like you were having fun," the man calls out suddenly, making Adam jump in place.

"What?" he calls back, confused. Then, to his chagrin, the man starts to make his way over.

"You and your friends," he motions his head towards the club, shrugging. "Tara took you guys up there, to the platform. You looked like you had fun." He brings the lit marijuana cigarette to his lips again, the cherry brightening and gathering ash as he takes a gentle pull. He flicks it to the side with the tip of his thumb, leaning up against the wall with the door counting the space between them.

"Oh," Adam mumbles, eyes trailing to the side of them. He thinks for a moment, wondering if he did have fun jumping and watching the crowd below dance with him, and finds that he can actually agree.

"Yes, it was fun. Although, Beth's friends took drugs while we were up there. I don't know if she did, I didn't see her take any, she usually doesn't. At least, to my knowledge she doesn't But, seeing that made me nervous." He sees the man hunch his shoulders for a second, lifting his hand to take one last drag before dropping the joint to the floor. He snuffs it out with a little, *Ah, fuck, sorry*, and Adam has the presence of mind to laugh a little over it.

"Thank you." he says quietly, nodding, then turning a bit more to face him. He takes quick, birdlike peeks between the man and the floor, mostly using his peripheral to see the white, red, and brown striped shirt and loose black dress pants he wears. He stares at shiny black shoes when he says, "I don't really go to places like this."

"No?"

He shakes his head, no.

He misses the way the man's eyes travel from his flushed face to the dip of his throat, misses the lick of his lips as he crosses his arms in front of his chest.

"What do you like to do instead?"

Adam blinks at him for a second, and with a bit of remembered effort, mirrors the way the other man stands. Leaning, crossing his arms, but he fidgets too much, tucks his hands underneath his arms til they end up sliding into his pant pockets.

“Lots of things.” He tries thinking for a second through the buzz of alcohol fuzzying his head. “I recently when to an exhibit this last Saturday at the library where they had guest speakers from NASA.” He leans forward on the point of his shoes, catching his hands in a lock in front of himself. “I had already seen the new images from Webb they released a few weeks ago, but I find going to events like that opens up the opportunity for some really interesting conversations and theorizing.

It’s nice, too, because the library has all different types of people that have access to it. Moms, old veterans, high school kids, ex-convicts. All of them wanting to learn more together, in a space that’s quiet and smells good and has air conditioning. Overall, it’s one atmosphere that I really enjoy.” He pauses, takes a breath, says, “I’m talking about Central, by the way, not Public. Public tends to be extremely busy and noisy, and there are never any free tables.”

The other man seems to be soaking in what he has to say, but Adam has a pulse of distant fear that he’s maybe said too much, that it doesn’t match the other’s intent of conversation. Beth always tries to remind Adam to be more of an active listener, to let the other person lead the conversation lest they become lost in what he has to say. Almost ready to open his mouth again, to apologize or to explain, he gets cut off first by the other man saying,

“I haven’t had the time to check out any of the libraries here, but that’s a good point. I’ll try and check them out, pick up something new.”

A little zing of surprise flits through him, and Adam asks, “Are you not from here? Do you like to read?” He doesn’t realize he’d asked two questions at once until the man is laughing. He stutters out something like an apology, but is cut off again when the other says,

“I read, yes. And, I’m not from here, no.” He doesn’t expand on it, but there’s a sharpness and curve to some of his words that sound Slavic, vaguely Russian, but not quite. Adam’s ears prickle as he tries honing in on its origin while the man continues to speak.

“I don’t necessarily do heavy research into things like space, but I do enjoy history quite a bit, and the classics. I enjoy… adventure,” he counts off in an almost-teasing tone, “Stories of revenge. Romance. Tragedy, war,” A little smirk curls up on his face as he finishes saying this, and Adam catches onto it with a stippling of heat warming the back of his neck.

“I’ve never really liked fiction.” Adam blurts out, barely pausing for breath. “I feel like it’s hard to imagine what the author is trying to convey if everything isn’t in very great detail, and- and whenever it *is* in great detail, it’s always extremely boring and so far beyond the point of mattering in regard to what the story is trying to teach you.” Another breath in, and he swears he can feel the stranger’s eyes on him like they were hands. He realizes he has goosebumps. From the cold?

He continues on, “I prefer learning something new or expanding on what I know, rather than trying to- to make it all up on my own. It just makes more sense to me that way.”

“A little imagination never hurt anybody.” the other teases lightly, shrugging one shoulder. Then, as if finally realizing, he picks himself up to stand straight from the wall and reach one hand out toward Adam. His gaze, unintentional or not, smolders a little when he adds,

“My name is Nigel, by the way. I didn’t catch yours?”

“Oh! Ah, Adam,” he takes Nigel’s hand and shakes with both of his out of surprise. He tries again, “My name is Adam, it’s very nice to meet you.”

His stomach swoops at the accompanying chuckle Nigel gives him. He slides his hand out of Adam’s and straight into his pocket, mirroring Adam from earlier. Not many usually find Adam quite so funny as to laugh that often with him, unless they’ve caught onto the fact that he’s a little bit different from them, and laughing over that. A feeling of sudden unease bubbles into his stomach as he wonders, then, if he’s not picking up clues from Nigel that he should.

But instead, Nigel ends up saying, “Very proper young man, aren’t you, Adam?” He flashes a sharp, quick little half-grin his way, which serves to flip Adam’s stomach another time. He’s not sure if it’s his voice or the words or how he speaks them, or that look that he can’t quite meet because if he does he might just explode, but it all settles like hot stones right in the center of him.

He has nothing to say to Nigel in response, so he says nothing at all, just stares down or up and away. Nigel seems to sense the lull, then says,

“We should move to the side, Adam, so we don’t run into somebody trying to get out.” It’s then he realizes they’d both gravitated towards each other while they’d been talking, nearly a foot apart now as they lean against the back door.

“Ah- ahh, um, actually,” he starts, slipping his phone out of his pocket to check the screen. He has 4 photos and two text messages from Beth, but he doesn’t open them right then. “I should probably head back inside. I think Beth and her friends might be back from having their cigarettes.”

Nigel hums with a little nod, stepping to the side anyway and pulling out what looks to be his own cigarette. “No problem, Adam. See you in there.” He ignores the way Adam watches him fit the cigarette between his teeth, cupping one hand over the other to spark up his lighter.

Adam mumbles something like *Yes, see you around!* and yanks open the door to throw himself back into the pool of light and color, music and bodies. He almost immediately regrets it, as his skin had just began to cool, and he actually had enjoyed his impromptu conversation with that stranger, with Nigel. But he should get back to Beth before she starts to worry, as she tends to get carried away if he’s away too long when they’re out in public.

He references the texts and photos briefly; it’s shots of all three girls climbing up steep metal steps, dresses and skirts hiking up to show the long expanses of their legs, bare and shiny or wrapped tight in sheer, ripped fishnet. He heads his way over to where he thinks she is, and relief hits him like a truck when he finds them easily. They’re sipping new drinks and

ushering him over, and Beth is quick to wrap her arms around his shoulders to pull him in for a kiss.

The majority of her lipgloss has been licked off her lips during the duration of the night, but as they kiss, there's still some tacky film he can feel with each press and pull of their mouths. Beth is drunk now, he can tell, and his hands find the skinny curve of her waist to go and hold her steady. He feels it's inappropriate, too, to kiss like they are in front of her friends, so he gently pulls her back after one last, deep press of their lips.

"Where were you?" She coos, rocking from side to side and then resting her head on his shoulder. He presses his chin lightly against the crown of her head, arms awkwardly holding her in as she burrows up against his chest.

"I went to the restroom, and then got some fresh air outside." he answers, just petting and pulling the very ends of her tangled hair. He brushes some strands away from both of her shoulders, letting her angle up so they can share another, softer kiss.

"Away from the cigarettes," Beth guesses with a crinkled, knowing smile.

"Away from the cigarettes," he repeats with a nod. It's only a beat later before he realizes that that isn't quite true. And then he wonders, should he tell her about Nigel? Was there anything to really tell, other than he had spoken to a stranger and had an arguably good conversation for something struck up at a warehouse? He decides against it, and soon after is ushered to try each of the girls drinks, and go and get them all a fresh round. He keeps a running tab in his mind of tonight's expenses, but he knows he isn't the type to follow up on these things. Neither are Beth's friends.

He doesn't finish his drink, and refuses the dogging on that Beth and her friends give him to rally up and continue. He drinks water instead, and takes two trips to the bathroom just to get a few moments of peace. He feels fine, but he's tired, and tired of feeling that ever-present buzz in his skull. Adam splashes water on his face, scrubs through his hair, and when he gets back near their little table tucked against the corner, Tara is there, offering them more of her poppers. Adam's face pulls into a deep frown as he watches Beth inhale with a blissful, happy look on her shadow-glowing face, keeping her hair back by both hands in it. Adam hesitates to join them, stalling for a moment and jumping when someone passes closely by him.

"Hey!" they call, and Adam turns to look over his shoulder. Nigel's behind him, using two fingers against his shoulder blade to help usher him forward so he can scoot by. "Having fun?" he calls, eyes scanning the crowd instead of looking down at Adam. There's a pulse in his stomach, one that's maybe fueled by the alcohol, or maybe it's just the way he is, but he says,

"No, not really." Nigel doesn't seem to hear him, so he bends down closer and shouts, "Hah?"

"No!" Adam shouts back, neat and simple even though he wants to expand on it. He's closer to Nigel now, and even through the humidity of the club and all the other distractions, he catches a whiff of something warm and entirely pleasant, sweet and spicy like burnt toffee

and cigarettes. It takes him a moment to realize it's Nigel that smells like that, and without a note of self-consciousness he takes another, deeper breath in. Like a familiar, soft sensation, it helps to focus and calm his nerves a little.

Nigel's grin is sharp when Adam goes for another quick glance. He images Nigel laughing in this moment, too, but the bass is so loud and hypnotic that he can't hope to hear it.

"Why's that?" Nigel keeps his voice loud but careful next to Adam's ear, which is appreciated, but more than anything he'd like for them to be able to hear each other without yelling.

Adam pauses before answering, warring with what he could say. He watches straight ahead now, through the crowd, as Beth and her friends laugh and cheers with Tara. They're gathering their purses and jackets up again, and Adam sees Beth take a cursory glance through to- maybe to look for him? Her eyes do land on him this time, and he feels a distinct sinking in his gut when she lights up.

"Adam!" she calls, raising up on her toes and throwing an arm into the air. "Tara wants us to go back up, come on!" She's so excited, and a little more than drunk, and Adam feels so bad but it's the very last thing he wants to do. He hesitates too long, and she starts to make her way over.

"Ahh, fuck," Nigel says beside him, and it so succinctly covers how Adam feels in that moment he barks with a laugh. The sound is a little terrified, though, and he jumps when Nigel's shoulder brushes against his.

Before either of them can speak up again, Beth has made her way through the crowd that seems to part for her as for royalty. Adam hears the displeased click of a tongue, and before he can turn to Nigel to investigate his expression again, Beth shouts,

"Adam! Tara wants us to go back up and dance with the DJ! Let's go!"

"I don't really feel like it, Beth. I'm starting to get tired." He yells back, leaning forward towards her. He can feel Nigel hovering awkwardly at his side, caught between steps in wanting to stay by Adam as well as give them some fucking privacy. "I think I might want to go home soon."

"Adam, no," Beth withers, catching for his hand. This is when Nigel steps away completely, weaving himself into the crowd and going off alone on his own mission. Adam feels a pang of something, unsure of what it is and not having the time to dissect it before Beth is leaning forward to speak into his ear.

"Just a little while longer. Please? Stay. Please stay." He doesn't know if she realizes she's doing it or not, but Beth presses the back of his hand, or, the whole line of his knuckles, just where the top of her pussy starts over the dress. She leans her hips into his hand (so maybe she does know?), getting closer to the side of his head and saying,

"I wanted to go back home with you tonight." She jumps on her heels a little when she says it, and a fiercer blush crawls over his skin at the plush feel of her flesh against his hand. A

spark of heat zips through him from her words, too, pressing ticklishly against his ear: "Could you please hold off a little longer? For me? Pleeease?" She dips to ghost her mouth over his neck, where he's sensitive and squirming away from it.

"I-" he sighs, obviously torn, "I mean, I guess… yes, I can- I can stay… I'll see if I can get a tea or something, to help keep me awake."

"They might only have RedBull, or soda." She perks up immediately, and pulls him in for another kiss on the dance floor. They're uncaring for the beat or for the people around them jumping, just focusing (or, trying to) on each other and the bumping line of their bodies. Even so, in the very back of his mind, he wonders if Nigel might be passing them by somewhere, if maybe he can see them, of how close they are.

As they kiss, tongues sliding together with much practice, Adam can feel himself start to become aroused. He wishes Beth wouldn't do these sorts of things in public with him, because it was hard to control his body's reactions once they started to happen. He starts to pull away, hands cupping her bony elbows and saying into her ear,

"You go ahead and dance. I'll be here, I'll wait for you." Beth leans her face against his, kissing him once on the mouth and then again at its corner. She bids him farewell for only a little while, practically skipping and dancing through the throng of people and towards that dark little hallway from before. Finally, Adam breaks away, heading straight for the bathroom to do some damage control.

Blissfully, the bathroom is completely empty, and he locks himself in a stall. His combs his fingernails through his hair, knowing it must look like an absolute wild mess by this point. His penis is half-hard in his pants, and he fights to regain control of just where his blood is flowing.

He doesn't think of gross things, or anything that would frighten him, but instead sits at the very edge of the toilet to fold his head in hands and just *think* for a moment. He doesn't feel very drunk anymore, but his body and his mind are very tired, and a headache threatens to scrape the insides of his temples. He knows there's some part of him that would want to initiate sex with Beth later tonight, but he also doesn't like it so very much when they come home and she's had too much to drink. She ends up sloppy and mewling, limp and uncoordinated, but she *does* end up sleeping exceptionally well through one of those nights. Adam wars through these thoughts, wishing instead that he didn't have to deal with that at all.

Then, what pops into his head next, for some reason, is Nigel, plucking the marijuana cigarette from his mouth and crushing it out almost immediately after Adam had brought up his discomfort. He thinks of the way Nigel had listened to him with something close to genuine interest, from what he could tell, and finds himself remembering that he never caught the title names or authors of any of the books he enjoyed reading. He wonders then if he would put himself through reading a work of fiction if it meant it was one of Nigel's favorites, and in the next instance, wonders if Nigel would do the same with something he liked. His presence when he'd passed by Adam on the floor was almost immediately grounding, and he'd lingered in on the scene with Beth when he knew Adam had no interest in following her off to go and dance. Thinking on it, he doesn't actually understand why

Nigel had stepped away if he'd had something to say to Adam in the first place, but neurotypical people weren't always so easy for him to understand. Still though, he was able to just narrowly avoid being dragged back up to the DJ booth, for which he was eternally grateful.

Adam stands, noting with absolute relief that his half-chub has almost completely calmed after being lost in his thoughts for a moment. He extricates himself from the stall and washes his hands anyway, weirded out by being in the bathroom and not washing them before taking his leave.

When he leaves the restroom, it's with a vague hope that he'll somehow catch Nigel in the crowd again. He scans across the sea of people for a moment, looking for strips of white and the silvering blond mop of hair that had been combed haphazardly back. He finds nothing, and wonders if he might have any luck outside.

Adam stalls on this plan of action, however, settling to the side of the room to nurse on water and watch Beth, Megan, Lauren, and Tara share the time of their lives.

It isn't until he really does have to pee that he heads back towards the bathroom to relieve himself. He goes into a stall, preferring privacy versus peeing in front of strangers, and is pleasantly surprised to recognize as a striped shirt and blond hair walks out of one of the stalls while he's drying his hands.

"Hello, Nigel."

"Hey, Adam." Nigel quirks a half-smile, going to the sink to wash his hands. It's under the dingy bathroom lights that Adam can get a better look at him, better still for the way Nigel doesn't stare back. He keeps at his task with patience, letting Adam look. He's taller and bigger than Adam, older, with two chains of gold and silver wrapped delicately around his neck. He wears a chain bracelet and two rings. Wisps of blond hair stick flat to Nigel's chest from the parting of a few of his buttons and the tattoos, Adam saves for last.

He doesn't have enough time, though, because Nigel's stepping towards him and nodding his chin to the paper towel dispenser. They're silent as Nigel dries his hands. His lips purse like he's holding back a smile, saying,

"You waiting around for someone, Adam?"

An icy flush sinks inside of him as he realizes, *oh*, and before he can make an excuse for lingering, Nigel says,

"Sorry, no, no, I'm just messing with you, stea. I was going to go out and have a smoke." The unfamiliar word trips Adam up, and as Nigel turns to throw his trash away just to the side of Adam, he's distinctly aware of the distance between them. "Care to join me?"

"I don't smoke." Adam says, frowning in a little bit of dismay.

Nigel's eyes crinkle up before he says, "I know. I just meant for some fresh air. Your friends, they're back to it? Dancing and all?"

“Yes,” Adam sighs, not realizing how much he deflates at the mention. Nigel does, though, and replays,

“Come on, then.” He opens the door and waits for Adam, then starts taking the lead through the crowd. Adam follows closely behind, wondering how the hell Beth and Nigel can get people to part for them so easily. He watches Nigel’s hands while they move in, how the backs of his knuckles brush up on people’s shoulders or the smalls of their back as if to say, *I’m here, behind, coming through* in a way that people seem to just listen to. He supposes it makes sense, then, because Adam would have never thought to touch people he doesn’t know or like.

Neurotypical people. Seriously.

Soon though, they’re back in that same dark hallway, which is now littered with groups of two’s and threes mingling with their drinks. Nigel holds the door open for Adam again, and just like the first time, the wall of cool air that hits him is a total balm.

There’s a few people out here, too, smoking and chatting with their friends or potential partners. Adam and Nigel walk to the very corner of the building, where he and Nigel’s friend were the first time. Nigel keeps some good distance between them when he sparks up, and it’s only then that Adam really notices that he’s limping a little.

It’s takes him a second to ask, but he can’t seem to hold the question inside. “Are you hurt?”

The question seems to pull the attention of the people around them. He doesn’t miss the way Nigel’s mouth twists back to show teeth before he’s taking his unlit cigarette between his lips.

“No,” is all he says at first, lighting the thing with careful, nearly-shaking hands. His gaze flicks around to the few groups of lingerers, voice more quiet as he answers back just for Adam, “Not anymore.”

There’s a beat of silence long enough for Nigel to take two drags. Adam feels guilty, because maybe he’d asked about something he shouldn’t have. He works up the courage to say, “I’m sorry,” wringing his fingers together a little. “I-“ he starts, wondering if he should pick this conversation up with a stranger. He decides that it’s best to be honest, and direct, so, “I have a hard time with- with social cues? And- and asking about things when sometimes I maybe shouldn’t. I was just curious, is all.”

“Id tell you,” Nigel replies, tapping his cigarette out. It’s only halfway burned down before he tosses it to the ground, stepping on the end to snuff it out. He shakes out his hair then smoothes it back, ruffling out his shirt a little as if to get rid of some of the smoke smell. He steps closer to Adam next, enough to talk in a more lowered tone. “Sort of a complicated story though, if I’m being fucking honest.”

“Of course, I understand. Sorry,” he says again, staring at Nigel from the corner of his eye. “I do always appreciate honesty, though. It- I have a hard time picking up on when people are joking, too, or when they’re being sarcastic. So,” he shrugs, but doesn’t miss the little smile that flits on Nigel’s face, small and true, and he finds himself matching it, too.

“That’s alright,” Nigel responds easily, voice a little gruff. He sniffs once, then says, “The world is full of fucking idiots, Adam, and a lot of the time, the honest ones don’t even make it very far. It’s a rare quality, to not be afraid of being honest.” He snorts then, saying, “World’s full of people where all they want to do is take advantage. Up to you to clock it and stay the Hell out of their way.” Adam nods at his words, and although they’re a bit cloaked in metaphor, he feels some of its sentiment ringing true for him.

In that moment, two groups head back inside, while three people still linger together and talk rather loudly about their friend group drama.

Adam and Nigel share a bare, quick look between them, as if to read *scandalous* before they’re both breaking out into silly little grins. When Nigel’s face sobers up a bit from that, he mentions next, “Girl’s pretty.”

“Hm?” He scans the other people outside with them, making out two young men and a tall, skinny blond with an alligator purse. He blinks a few times. “Oh. Yeah, I guess so.”

He doesn’t catch the funny look Nigel throws him while he’s trying to figure Adam out. “No, Adam, I—“ he chuckles a little, “I meant, the girl you were with earlier?”

“*Oh,*” he grins back a little, fists clenching and unclenching with nervous energy as realizes the mistake. “Yes, that’s Beth… Yes, she is very pretty.” Adam doesn’t expand on that thought like Nigel had assumed he would.

“She is.” Nigel agrees, falling silent for a second. Then, “You always take pretty girls to clubs and leave them the second you can?”

To his surprise, Adam buries his face in both hands with a groan. “No, not usually…! She doesn’t always bring her friends. I don’t really *like* her friends. And… I saw Beth taking the- those drugs that that girl had, Tara? And it just—“

“Why does it make you so uncomfortable? Not that I don’t get it.”

Adam’s shoulders raise, but before he can get defensive about it, Nigels says, “No, no, I get it, I get it. I do. I guess I’m not too keen on being around people like that anymore, either.”

“It’s just very draining. I don’t like it. I’ve never liked the feeling of not being in control, and people just act so… *stupid* or- or *strange* when they aren’t— aren’t fully themselves. It-“ he cups both hands under his elbows, as if to protect him against the thought itself. “It annoys me, and I feel scared, even when nothing is happening. Why do they have to do that when we’re hanging out? Why can’t they just have fun without it?”

“I get it,” Nigel murmurs for a third time, straying closer to Adam’s side. “People are fucking selfish, Adam, and drugs are fucking fun.” He laughs out loud over the way Adam squicks at that, shooting Nigel uneven glances all while he sports a wide, shiny grin.

When his chuckling dies down, Nigel starts back up, “I think what matters is surrounding yourself with people who care about you. In the ways *you* need them to. Not the other way around.” He doesn’t read the wistful tone in Nigel’s voice, nor does he catch the way his eyes

trail down the length of Adam's neck to then skirt off towards the alley. He doesn't, however, miss the soft sigh that leaves through Nigel's nose, but he doesn't have enough of the pieces to puzzle it together.

Nigel is close, staring down at Adam with half-lidded eyes. Adam can smell the smoke and rich, sweet, spiced cologne mixed with his sweat, even though he never saw Nigel dancing tonight. It all lingers like candy between his teeth. He lets his own eyes trail from across both of Nigel's shoulders and up to his neck, sticking briefly to the little tattoo of a pin-up girl stretching on the side of his throat. He stops at Nigel's chin, too, the square line of his stubbled jaw, and only looks at his mouth when the flash of something shiny catches his attention.

"You about ready to head home soon, tiny dancer?" Nigel asks him with a lilt, voice so quiet that it goes all gravelly. A little smile pulls on Adam at the *tiny dancer* dig. He looks up at Nigel, and the same shine catches briefly across Nigel's teeth when he smiles back. Adam finds that he can't make himself look away.

"You…" Adam starts, swallowing. He loses his train of thought, skimming up the straight edge of Nigel's nose and then finally, finally meeting his eyes. They shine and crinkle in quiet fondness down at him, and Adam, as if embarrassed by the contact, skips his gaze back down to stare at Nigel's mouth where it's safe and comfortable to look at. He follows the motion when it opens for Nigel to speak, but the man ends up staying quiet on second thought.

Then, Nigel's leaning down and kissing him. A large hand cradles softly over the side of his neck, lips pursing and moving over his dry ones until they finally start to catch up. Nigel's other hand moves over Adam's ribcage, the one at his neck dropping to the opposite side to *squeeze* gently over them. Adam makes a sound, and Nigel echoes it, opening up to lick over the seam of Adam's chapped mouth.

In Adam's tired, lightly-alcoholed brain, he catalogues all the differences between kissing Nigel and kissing Beth. Nigel's lips are still full and soft like Beth's, but they move in an entirely pleasant way, with much more direction and confidence in comparison to her light, lingering presses. His experience may be skewed, too, over the lip filler that Beth gets every few months. The scratch of Nigel's facial hair against his chin and the sides of his mouth are surprisingly pleasant too, and he sighs through his nose in quiet, unhurried pleasure when their heads slot to the opposite side to go for a better angle.

Nigel pulls himself a little tighter into Adam's space, breathing his scent in through his nose in one deep inhale between kisses. His right hand falls down to Adam's hip and then, to his immediate surprise, goes to cup the part between his legs.

Understanding shocks through Adam all at once like a flailing live-wire. He flies back so quickly that the back of his head *bangs* against the brick wall with an audible sound, paired with one of his own shocked yelps. They stare at each other dead in the eyes for what feels like an eternity, but really must be only a few seconds. Adam's teeth chatter audibly, from the cold or from the fright, it doesn't matter, but he whips his body to the right of them so quick to start stalking away without another word. They'd both been alone, he realizes belatedly.

When did those people go inside? He thinks he hears Nigel call his name, which he ignores entirely.

*What did he think he was **doing**?*

*What did **Nigel** think he was doing?!*

Panic seizes him as he walks briskly, his guts and lungs and, Hell, even his hammering heart feeling like they've all been blended up into a horrible soup of near-hysteria and confusion. He doesn't bother going back inside, doesn't want to see Beth or take care of her drunken woes.

He hails one cab out of the many that idle with their smoking drivers, slamming a broken twenty into the palm of one who takes him home. In the back seat, he texts Beth an apology and that he's heading home for the night. He curls himself up against the door, going through the 5 stages of grief over just how he was going to explain this to her whenever he sees her next.

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"Fuck, fuck, fuck, shit, FUCK! FUUUCK!"

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

hey guys! excited to share this 18k+ wall w you. thanks for waiting.

this chapter has a follow-along playlist too called Original Angel. :^)

thanks v much, enjoy

When Adam gets home, he stares at his bed while utter exhaustion permeates across his body like T.V. static. He knows he can't climb in just yet, he's *rank* with sweat and all of those phantom imprints of other people's hands and bodies all over. But, it's also 1:47 A.M..

He closes his eyes for second, feeling them burn, and files his way to the connecting bathroom.

Once a fresh towel is thrown onto his pillow and he's in a t-shirt and comfortable sleep pants, he slinks on top of his made-up bed.

It isn't until after he's fallen asleep that he makes his way underneath the covers, his hair dry and stuck to one side at awkward angles. He only wakes to push his towel to the floor, rolling around underneath, blinking blissfuly back to sleep.

At roughly 3 o'clock in the morning, Adam wakes up to the clinking of keys from the other room. He blinks in the darkness, breathing, listening for more. The door thuds shut quietly, but there are no footsteps to accompany any further proceedings into his home.

Adam sits and waits, sits and listens, and only startles at the *blang* of *something* falling to the linoleum floor. He finally rises out of bed, mustering up enough to creak his way to the open bedroom door, going to just peek over the edge of the wall.

No lights or sound, save for the glow towards the right of his home that blinks out with a sudden *slam*. Adam gasps out loud in a quick, clipped take, frozen-solid til Beth finally pops her head out from beyond the refrigerator.

"Adam!" she half-whispers, straightening up only to wobble a little on her bare feet. "Agh—I'm so sorry, I- I didn't mean to wake you up just yet."

"Beth? What are you doing here?" he finds himself half-whispering back, creeping carefully through the living room to join her in flipping on the kitchen light.

“I told you,” she says then, blinking hard when the light flickers on, blinding them both. “I wanted to go back home with you.”

The key, he thinks with sudden realization. Beth just used the spare key he had given her, after she had asked for it a few months ago. He doesn’t actually know how often she uses it, because this is the first time he’s ever seen her do it.

He relaxes a little, but only by a fraction. “Beth, I’m… sorry. When I said that I was going home early, I- I had meant, alone.”

“I,” she starts, leaning against the counter with one hand. A glass is pulled out from the cupboard up above; it looks like she had been about to grab herself some water. “I know, I just, I still wanted to see you.”

Adam tries to manage a smile at that, but it doesn’t reach past a twitch on his mouth. He sighs, looking down at both of their bare feet on the bright tile, then manages to look up at her.

“I appreciate that, Beth, but,” he shakes his head a little, reminded just then how achingly tired he is. “I think Id like to be alone, for the rest of the night.”

She frowns at him, then takes the few steps it counts to stand in front of him and then melt into his arms. He lets her float there in the cradle of them, muscles burning and his back aching while he stands in-posture.

Her arms are curled inward against his chest, but soon they’re snaking around him, just as her lips and nose start to find his warm, clean neck. In a rush of something not *quite* like anger, his hands make their way up to her arms to grab for and pull her back, saying,

“Beth, *please*. I’m- I’m tired.” He looks her in the face, and sees under the harsher lights her sweated-off make-up, the sparkles on her cheeks smeared down into muddled blush and splotchy foundation. He finds her eyes, then, or— skims over the bloodshot of them, for the way that they seem to bore into his, *pleading* with him.

It all comes back to him then, the night they’d shared just hours before; of seeing Megan and Lauren, dancing with Tara and feeling that magnetic pull of the crowd down below. Briefly, very briefly, his mind catches over the thought of a white-striped shirt and sandy blond hair, shaking out under the building light to try and rid himself of the smoke smell.

Adam visibly pulls back, away from Beth, and grits out, “I think you should go. I’m sorry, Beth. Really, *really*, I am. I’m just— I’m so tired.”

It feels like a lame excuse, and he can see on her face that she thinks so too, but he just *can’t do this* right now. He *has* to fortify himself, *has* to sleep, *has* to eat his breakfast in the morning. It’s Sunday right now. Sunday, Sunday.

Beth pulls out from the grip about her arms, her brows having knit together the tighter and tighter Adam’s hold had become. Her eyes fill with unshed tears, blinking against the clumping mascara on her bottom lashes.

Her mouth twists sharply on a, “Whatever, Adam.” She’s upset. Of course she’s upset. She sniffles, then walks to bend down and grab for her heels that had been dropped in a pile on the other side of the kitchen.

She pushes past him after grabbing for her keys on the counter, bidding him a bitter, “Sleep well,” as she goes.

The front door slams shut, and Adam groans softly. It’s so late, and their neighbors don’t deserve this kind of disturbance. Hell, *he* doesn’t deserve this kind of disturbance. He shuffles over to lock his door, eyes scanning the kitchen on his way through before he goes to put the unused glass away.

Adam leans against the counter and lets his eyes close again. When the lights flick off, he goes back to his bedroom, and prays for no further disturbances.

Wrapping himself up amongst his soft, heavy comforter, his eyes wet the pillows until he can finally fall back to sleep.

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It takes he and Beth four days until they see each other again. She had texted him a few times in between, but he’d been so drained this week that he’d done very little to respond back. It isn’t until Wednesday night, two hours after he gets home from work, that she shows up on his doorstep again. This time, she knocks.

Adam knows it’s her before he looks through the peephole. She’s the only person other than Harlan (unlikely as it is) who would visit him at this time. And besides, he’d already spoken with Harlan this Monday, during their lunch.

They’d sat on their bench, their lunches in-between them, as Adam carefully picked apart details of his weekend to talk about and share. It wasn’t until the conversation veered off the deep end as Harlan talked about his lady-friend and how they both took her kid to the zoo just this Saturday.

“Bats, goats, lions, bears, I don’t *care*,” he’d said with emphasis, smashing on his stuffed chicken quesadilla with a resolute shake of his head. “Listen, I love the girl, but that kid of hers is *dumb*. Dumb as a rattle of rocks.”

Adam hadn’t been listening to him for at least the last two minutes, and when he attempts to catch up, he only gets more confused. There’s a nagging feeling at the back of his mind, and he feels like just he needs to— to *talk* to someone about what’s been circulating his mind. So, he tries.

“Harlan,” Adam’s voice breaks out, a little creaky from general disuse. He cuts the man off in the middle of his sentence, gaining a little, peevish glare from his dad’s friend.

When nothing else comes out of Adam's mouth, Harlan barks, "What?" He seems to sense Adam's overall withdraw, though, cause seconds later he's dialing his tone back a bit more, the hands that cradle his quesadilla dropping into his lap. "What, son? What is it?"

Adam stares down at the concrete beneath his shoes. In between the cracks, there are little sprouts of weeds and things pushing their way up, up. He scuffs the toe of his sneaker against one stalk, pressing it down, stepping, twisting it out.

"I think I made a really big mistake this weekend." Adam mumbles next, trying to collect himself. When Harlan gives him the room, the silence he needs to work his way around, he finally gets out with it. He tells Harlan from point A to point Z about Beth, and how they met up with her friends at a place called *The Orbit!*. He skips the part on dancing with the DJ in his raised platform booth, and the part where Beth and her friends took drugs. He doesn't really feel like Harlan would be too happy about that, and doesn't want his perception of Beth to become skewed in some way.

The part he does talk about, however, is the hardest to get out. How does he explain Nigel? He knows how he could begin, *maybe*, but how can he even sum up everything that happened within what felt like only a few minutes? He knows it's longer, that they'd jumped into each other's orbits at a few different intervals throughout the night, but it all feels like it just happened so *fast*. When he finally works out what he wants to say, it ends up being:

"I… I cheated on Beth, Harlan. I cheated on Beth with a- a *man*, and he k-*kissed* me, and —…" he pauses, takes a breathe, gets out next, "I cheated on Beth."

He doesn't look up at Harlan's face to see his reaction, "And I-… we- he-" He stops himself flat, brain whirring in hundreds of directions on how he can get this out. When all's finally jumped out from him, Harlan nearly shouts,

"I'll *kill 'em!*" Adam's more than a little miffed, glancing over at Harlan in between picking apart his sandwich ingredient by ingredient. "Adam, you tell me what he looks like and I *swear to God* I'll kill 'em!" His whole frame seems to be shaking with rage, a feeling that Adam himself had not quite been inspired to emulate.

"I don't… think that'll be necessary, Harlan," Adam responds back, quiet. "But… thank you. It's just… I… I have to tell Beth. She was cheated on before, in the past, by her previous boyfriend." A little furl of anguish rips through his center then, stinging his eyes as he drowns a little bit in what feels like self-inflicting misery. "I never meant to do something like that to her. And I- I just don't know how to talk to her about it."

"No, no, no!" Harlan huffs, facing Adam more on the bench. "Adam, boy, you can see that this ain't your fault, can't you? Whatever that dickhead thought he was tryna pull-" Harlan flaps a hand out, as if to say, *good riddance!*

"Adam, this sounds like the furthest thing from cheating I have ever heard. If I were you," Harlan says with gravity, "I wouldn't even bother. Nothin' to worry her about when there ain't nothin' to worry about, right? Just— you stay outta that part of town. You hear me? Adam, now, look at me, son, I'm very serious here. I don't want to hear that you're runnin' into any sort of trouble that you can keep yourself out of. Your father would *kill* me *dead*."

Once they'd wrapped up with this conversation and their lunches as neatly as they could, Adam had gone back to work.

He considers Harlan's advice as carefully as he can, but something about it just doesn't sit right with him.

Not telling Beth is more than omitting the truth, he fears. It's straight-up, bold-face lying. He has to tell her, before the week is up. He just needs a little more time, a little bit more time, to sort through this disarray of thoughts.

So, when Beth shows up at his door two hours after he gets off work (when she knows he's fed, showered, and finally winding down for the night), it's with a mix of both relief and absolute terror.

He lets her in, lets her hug him, and lets his hands travel up the smooth plains of her back as she rocks against him. Her hair is up in a big claw clip, twisted tight with little curly pieces whisping around her neck.

She tries to go in for a kiss after her quiet apology over early Sunday morning, but he stalls her by gentling her shoulders and turning his head to the side.

He sighs out long and soft, looking down between their bodies. "Beth. I'm sorry. I… I think that we should talk."

They move themselves to the couch, and Beth swings both of her legs over his lap for closeness. He generates a tight smile for her, glancing up and taking her hands in his. He stares down at them for a long, long time, playing with her fingers and rubbing his thumb over hers.

When he tells her what he's done, he can't watch her face. She stills by his side, her nervously-swinging feet curling their toes as it sinks in that he'd been with somebody else. She gently pulls her hands out of his, her legs up and away, instead wrapping her arms tight around herself.

"Adam…" She begins, speechless.

"I'm— I'm *so* sorry, Beth," he grits out, hands fisting over and over in his lap. "It didn't mean *anything*. I didn't mean for it to happen. I promise you, I didn't, and I… I've just felt so sick about it all week, and I didn't know how to tell you, but I knew that I needed to," he rambles, running his hands up into his hair to tug in certain areas. It helps a little, but not enough to protect him against the sound of her first sob.

"Out of *all* of the people, Adam," she gets out, her words muffled by the hands that now cradle her contorting face. "Out of *all of the people*…" she says again, curling in tighter.

He only wonders, later, had he the wherewithal to mention what more Nigel had done in conjunction to their kiss, if her reaction to all of this would have been any different.

Harlan had been incensed, livid, enough to threaten real-life violence against a man he doesn't know. And Nigel, the more Adam had thought about it, had looked… Dangerous, and he didn't want Harlan getting mixed up into Adam's own troubles, especially when he was more than capable of keeping the lid screwed tight on *that* can of worms.

He wonders, next, if Beth would have taken that extra bit of his story with a different sort of understanding than Harlan had. Would she have thought Adam had *wanted* what had happened? He fears that, sub-consciously, she would have. He'd ultimately felt that it'd be most wise to keep that part to himself.

Beth ended up telling him that she needed some time to think about everything. That she was hurt, but that she loved him, and it was only one kiss.

One week later, it came as little to no surprise to Adam when she broke up with him. It was over text, despite them living in the same building.

Somehow, though… that felt just fine.

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After the big life event of breaking up with his long-term girlfriend had come and gone, Adam began to spend most of his time alone again.

For the first few weeks, an air of general malaise seemed to follow around him no matter what he tried to do to shake it. However, once he started to re-calibrate himself into his tried-and-true routine that was always nothing but beneficial to him, he began to realize a couple of things:

One; Adam wasn't, and had never truly been, quite himself around Beth. Although he feels like he took away a lot of positive adjustments to his overall comfortability in Being A Relatively Normal Human In Society, he'd come to the conclusion that she and him were really never meant to be.

He could never truly be… *comfortable* around her, always needing to tone down the twitch of his hands when he'd get too excited, or the volume of his voice when he found something funny and she just didn't. She was always contesting the things he had to say, even if they were an ingrained part of how he thought, or, how he perceived the world around him. He always felt like he was walking on eggshells around her, ready for the next argument or another misunderstanding to come about so they could spend all night with tears in their eyes talking about what he'd done wrong, and how he could do better the next time.

So many rules, or hoops he had to jump through. Weren't relationships supposed to make life easier, more bearable? A team, he'd read in one internet article. Someone who can face not just the good, sweet, fun parts of life, but who could also help battle and fortify you alongside the bad, the tough, the evil parts, too.

The takeaway was that he'd always felt just a notch below Beth when it came to the methods and motions of Life. They were so different, and the only thing that had *really* brought them together was curiosity, and proximity, and general attraction. The shared interests, emotional attachment, it just wasn't there for him like the internet said it should be.

Part of him considered whether this was apart of his autism, if he wasn't able to make "normal" connections like other people could. But a bigger, more stubborn, quietly hopeful part of him thinks that maybe he just hasn't found it quite yet.

Something else that he'd begun to understand about himself was that he never, ever wanted to drink again. It had only caused him worlds of trouble and headaches thus far, and with Beth out of the picture (save for the very few times they'd awkwardly passed by each other in their shared building since the break up. Horrible.), he was able to stick to not partaking in anything beyond his own favorite non-alcoholic beverages. Why in the world would he do anything different? The foresight of stepping away from her to come to this conclusion was more than a welcome one.

He wouldn't be able to deny in a court of law that he hasn't felt more like himself than he has in a very, very long time.

Lastly, despite his absolute best efforts; in the time since he had visited *The Orbit!*, nothing he has tried to do has made him successful in stopping him thinking about Nigel.

Everything about that night was so terrifyingly confusing. He had never been interested in men before. The thought had never crossed his mind other than the general acknowledgement that some of his gender just had a particular, aesthetically-pleasing appearance. He'd never once thought of a man's towering stature against his to be comforting, let alone attractive, nor had he ever been partial to drowning himself in the mouthwatering concoction of cologne, tobacco, even the sweet-smelling marijuana, that had all clung to Nigel's throat like Adam's own personal cocktail of hearthfire pheromone.

He still thinks about it, despite his best efforts not to, and although he wouldn't admit it to anyone, at any time, Adam had at one point fished his shirt out from deep at the bottom of his laundry basket. To *smell it*, as much as the thought had grossed him out. He didn't particularly *want* to whiff his own body odor or the several splotches of spilled alcohol that must still be clinging to it, but the phantom memory of Nigel's scent still clings with claws into his amygdala.

He was surprised with himself, then, when he'd pressed the crumpled fabric just below his nose and smelled nothing beyond what he'd expected. The level of disappointment he'd felt when there was not so much as a lingering hint of Nigel anywhere on that shirt was enough to make a sound crawl out of his throat.

His stomach had sank, and he's shoved the shirt straight back into the laundry basket, picking up the rest of his clothes from the floor and heading out to do a woeful load of laundry.

In any case, although Adam did his best (truly) not to allow himself to think too hard on all this, whenever he *did* think of Nigel, the most overwhelming emotion conjured up was

simply a sense of… Disappointment. Disappointment in himself for betraying Beth's trust, disappointment with Nigel for making things so very, utterly *complicated*.

Despite all of these pain-points he had to mull over, Adam feels nearly rejuvenated getting back into the swing of things once his lifedust finally feels fit to settle.

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On Saturday afternoon (three weeks after Beth had dumped him, by the way), Adam decides to finally revisit his library.

He knows he's been avoiding it for several weeks now, for some troubling, innate fear that he might run into— well, Nigel. He remembers mentioning both spots to Nigel, and was terrified of seeing him on the off chance that he really would check one of them out. The notion alone made him nervous, for reasons that were both clear and unclear to him. He wasn't keen on dissecting it, though, preferring to drive himself forward in the rekindling of his interests to re-gratify his equilibrium.

So, when he visits Central on Saturday for the first time in forever, he inhales the familiar, book-sweet scent and gentle minglings of peoples' put-upon perfumes.

Central is a huge, clean cut, and neatly-organized establishment. Although the program they have going on today doesn't hold any interest for him, it's very relieving for Adam to see several familiar faces. Adam doesn't talk to people when he's out and about, and generally he's pretty well-left-alone, but he's among the several other locals that visit this library often. The quiet, well-knit community that gathers here feels like a haven for him, and he's glad all at once that he made it down.

Adam has several bookshelves of his own at home, full to the brim and overflowing with his favorites, so he likes to visit and check out a few copies so his home library doesn't become overflowing or disorganized. He peruses his usual sections, picking out well-worn copies of titles he's read before, and referencing his phone's notes for the ones he was looking forward to.

He has to check the library clerk's desk to see if one that he'd ordered to be delivered had come in yet. Adam often buys new editions of books from the library's Wish List to gift to them, so he never really feels bad about asking them to order up-to-date copies of *National Geographic*, upcoming releases of scientific journals, autobiographies from his actors, playwrights, and musical directors of interest. He figures that it evens out along the way.

He's pleasantly surprised when his order has indeed arrived, although the clerk playfully scolds him for not having come in for it sooner. He shoots her a big, toothy grin, apologizing and profusely thanking her.

He sits himself at a big leather seat at the corner where the light and shadow are perfect, where he can just see the lick of flame within the fireplace at the center, but isn't so close by that he'll start to get overwarm. Adam opens the hard cover of the first book in his pile, lifting one leg up to the seat and infusing himself into its pages.

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The early Sunday morning that Nigel gets home from the club, he slugs in through his silent apartment on lead-heavy feet. His body feels bruised from the long night, his mind even more-so after peeling through each and every instance that that evening held.

The sound of Adam's head hitting the brick wall had been on repeat from the moment he'd bolted off and around the corner of *The Orbit!*. Over and over, that *thwack* and gasp replays, the look of shock tight-knitting on his paling face.

Nigel goes to sleep with that sound looping and re-looping, and then wakes up to it all over again. The day drags on like nails on a chalkboard, through lunch and all the other bullshit in-between. He gets to the club at 5:53 P.M., two and a half hours before Sunday Drag Night is set to begin.

When Nigel gets there, he performs all of his pre-show check-ups, making sure all three bars are well stocked, that his bartenders and kitchen staff have everything they need, that the floors and bathrooms are all spotless, and mentally check-marking his staff as they each show up for their shifts on time. He makes a few calls to some of their distributers once he holes himself up in the office, leaving voicemails for them to check in on this coming Monday.

All the while, flashes of Adam plague him. The awkward, funny, melting way he'd seemed to dance high up on the platform, whipping his head around to grin wild and freely at an ecstatic crowd bouncing down below. Nigel had felt an immediate pull to that little creature, sticking out like a sore thumb amongst the crowd and still shining the absolute brightest for it. He doesn't let himself think of- of *kissing* Adam, feeling as though he's just this close of deleting the information from his brain matter entirely. Instead, he focuses on the misstep he'd made, and every time he does, a surge of madness, a roiling of bone-deep regret, grips him around the heart like it could kill him, a heart-heavy enough experience to make him lightheaded.

He accounts for, he leads, he soothes the staff over bickerings and work-related problems, and every time in-between, he thinks of Adam.

A half-hour before they open, Nigel spots Darko stalking down the employee hallway, towards the break room and likely the backdoor.

Before he's thinking better of it, he barks, "Hey," heart thumping hard in regret when Darko turns just before the right corner.

Darko stares at him with a scowl, a cigarette between his fingers with his other hand deep in a pocket.

“What?” he barks back, stepping aside to face him more.

Taking a deep breath and feeling worse for it, Nigel gruffs, “My office. I need to- talk to you.” Darko flirts his eyes towards the door at the end of the hall, clicking his tongue.

“Come outside with me.” he offers instead.

Outside. Outside, where it leads to the same area they smoked together the last time he and Darko saw each other. Outside, where it’s the last time he’d seen Adam, less than twenty-four hours ago.

“It’ll take one fucking minute,” Nigel wheedles instead, leaving little room for Darko to argue. He doesn’t say please, but the cursed word is on the tip of his tongue for the way Darko hesitates out of his own brand of tar-black petulance.

He clicks his tongue again, fitting the cigarette over one ear and stalking towards Nigel like a thunder cloud, following him close on his heels.

When they get to the office, Nigel doesn’t bother locking the door. He paces the small room, avoiding the long wood desk and leather chair sitting askew. When Darko finally has enough of watching Nigel run a path into the tile, he hisses,

“What? What the fuck is it, you ogre?”

Nigel’s eyes find the ceiling, fixing there for several long seconds.

“I fucking— fucked up. Fucking. Horribly.”

Darko raises one, dark eyebrow. He walks slowly the length of the room, two ringed fingers tapping on the wood of the desk before he swings around to sink into Nigel’s chair.

“Alright.” he says, clipped, raising his open palms in the air before spreading his fingers over the arms of the chair. “Is there some sort of tape we’ll be needing to… *reassess*, this time around?”

The words from his partner are like a (second) gunshot wound to the head. He stays silent for a very long time, recounting every single camera around this Godforsaken building. There were three on the backside of the building, covering the center and both sides for security purposes.

Nigel sinks down to sit on his haunches right there, burying his face into his hands with a pitiful, broken little laugh. *The cameras*. Footage. Of *course*.

For some reason, this doesn’t seem to complicate things as much as it might’ve for him, before. Seven-years-ago Nigel would have slammed into their Security Room, rewinded to that very same instance where he’d absolutely fucked his and another person’s perception of

fun and *carefree flirting* and straight into absolute *fucking* disaster. He would've found that ten minute clip of footage and deleted it until there was nothing left to implicate him.

Now, though, it's something like a sick, unfamiliar relief; knowing that if Adam, for whatever reason, needed back-up on a claim as to why Nigel was the dirtiest, most fucked-up old man on this side of the Atlantic that he could've ever had the misfortune of running into, Nigel could give it to him with a fucking bow on top of it and everything.

Darko, beyond impatient, puts both of his boots up on the desk, *just* to try and piss him off. It pulls no reaction from him in this moment, though, so he smears out in their own tongue, "If you just pulled me in here to grovel down on the floor like a dog, I'm going to go out and tell everyone you've really, finally fucking lost it, my friend."

"No," Nigel sighs, slowly rising up from his crouch on the floor. He rakes his hands through his hair, then says, "Do you remember that kid from last night? The fucking— the tiny one, brown, curly hair?" He says this, but knows Adam isn't *tiny*, just a bit shorter than him, but it's the first set of words he grabs onto, and semantics aren't exactly pivotal at this point in time.

"No," Darko deadpans, and Nigel frowns glaringly. Okay, maybe he does need to expand. Darko fishes out his lighter to flick it to life over and over. He doesn't want to, but he does ask, "Why?"

"I fucked up." he growls again, feeling frustration and sadness begin building deep behind his ribcage. "I-… We- talked. All night. I tried sussing out whether he was… *interested*," he bites, motioning for Darko to stand the fuck up.

Rolling his eyes, Darko does, and they switch places. Nigel falls down into the chair while Darko perches his seat on the edge of the desk.

"Darko…" Nigel swears, hanging his head in his hands again as returns to their native tongue. "I have never misread somebody so badly like that in my entire fucking *life, fuck*."

Darko crosses his arms, glaring suspiciously down at Nigel. "What did you do?"

"We *talked*," Nigel's voice ruffs, and he clears it to say, "I thought I was— I thought I was picking up that he was interested in me. He was so—" Nigel groans miserably, fingers going to pinch and pull the skin and muscle of his browbone. He wants to say *so fucking perfect*, but being this doggedly soupy in front of Darko felt like a dangerous game to play.

"We talked, and I fucking— flirted my ass off, and I *thought*…" he trails off, chest tightening hard at the flash of memory of Adam, his shaky-gazing eyes landing smooth over his own, down to his mouth, *staying* there, this other person so *different* from anyone he's every met before that he'd felt something like electrocuted by it.

"I thought we were on the same fucking page, and I took things way too fucking far, he—" fingernails rake through his head of hair again as he agonizes, knee jumping as Darko levels him with an air of feigned disinterest.

“So you sent some little mouse scurrying away. Congratulations, you fucking idiot.” He tacks on, for good measure. “There are plenty of fish in the sea, or whatever the Hell is the saying,” he continues in Romanian, although it doesn’t translate very well.

“Honestly,” Darko continues. “What does it matter? You’ll probably never have to see him again in your life.” He finishes this with a sharkish grin that makes blood roar in Nigel’s ears, palms beginning to sweat.

*What does it **matter**?* He thinks with a inferno of misdirecting anger. *Of course it fucking mattered.* How can he even *say* something like that?

“How can you even *say* something that?” is the next thing out of Nigel’s mouth. Darko just doesn’t understand, didn’t see the *look* on Adam’s *face*…!

He groans again, hanging his head in his hands and massaging fingers deep against his temples.

Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea talking to Darko about this. Maybe he should’ve just kept it to himself, tortured himself over it silently instead of looking for some kind of validation that he could go back in time and never have approached that beautiful, star-driven agoraphobe from the night before. Save Adam the trouble, save himself this heartache that languors throughout him like venomed wine.

“My friend, I think that you have not seen anyone beyond the context of ‘hi’ and ‘hello’ in a *very* long fucking time.” Darko says next with the perfect amount of both judgement and sympathy.

“I— I know,” Nigel responds, defeated when his mind, as always, draws back to Adam.

“Go get your head knocked around by some other— I don’t know, Nigel, your type is all over the fucking place. You need to go meet people. Get this out of your system for good.”

Nigel groans. “I *have*, I *do*, I meet people all the fucking *time*.” And he does. Despite what Darko may think, Nigel’s not a fucking idiot. He *knows* when people find him attractive, *knows* when he’s being checked out or assessed by appraising, curious eyes. For all it’s worth, it’s as if it hits a brick fucking wall.

Just this last Tuesday, the twinky little git with poofy hair and sparkly neck tattoos had told him, in all seriousness, “God, hold on a minute, it’s like I’m walking through an art museum,” when Nigel had stepped into the shop to write his name down.

And, for fuck’s sake, he’s *good* at this sort of thing. Or, at least, he usually fucking can be. So he’d laughed, he’d flirted back a little, given him the shine of his teeth that didn’t quite match the tired droop of his eyes. By the time he’d left the shop he’d somehow charmed all of the people there with so little as to make pleasant conversation along with well-timed, feigned interest.

Then, he’d gotten the fuck out of there with the feeling of a stone sitting hard and unmoving in his chest, wondering the whole time home what the fuck he’d looked like through Adam’s

eyes, instead.

He finishes the conversation up with Darko as quickly as he can, telling him it doesn't matter. He'd get over it, he's fine, get the fuck out of here. The rest of the night goes without incident, though still, the *thwack* plays over and over in the back of his mind.

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He needs a fucking haircut, and he's been thinking that for the past three weeks now. It's Saturday morning, and the club opens a bit earlier, but Nigel figures he might be able to run a few errands before he has to go in.

He combs his hair back, thankful for the good genes that let him have a full head of golden, albeit graying, hair. He's not too worried about the silvering parts. He figures he'd still look sexy with a full head of white hair. Like some kind of distinguished, older gentleman on the cover of *Men's*.

He snickers to himself a little over this, scrubbing his body down with a towel and jumping back into his bed with wet hair. He answers a couple of texts back that he'd gotten, some from the girls at the bar over reminders or things they needed, and some from Darko from the night before. He responds to the girls first, then calls Darko instead of looking at his messages.

"What?" is the almost-immediate response.

"Come out with me. It's a lovely Saturday."

There's a lull of palpable confusion on the other line. Nigel and Dark were close in the way that rats crossing on a tether were. Never close enough to nip at each other's tails, but just this side of enough to have a sense of duty towards each other, to make sure they both got across okay.

"Why?" is Darko's response.

"Because I have a ton of shit to do and I want company. What the hell are you up to? It's 10 o'clock on a Saturday," he accuses, rolling onto his stomach and switching his phone to speaker.

He gets up to start getting dressed, throwing on baggy jeans and layering a white t-shirt underneath a patterned button up short-sleeve. He tucks his shirt in and then belts it, listening to Darko complain to him the entire time.

"I'll pick you up." he says, searching for his keys.

They pay for parking, and start slapping the concrete towards Nigel's destination. They both get a trim and a line-up when they visit Nigel's barber, a little woman of 5-feet-nothing who speaks enough English to wring the shit out of the both of them.

They leave with self-indulgent smiles on the way, repeating back to each other the curse words she'd taught them in her native tongue. They call each other names the entire way back to the car, laughing and crowing exaggeratedly on how good of a job she did for each of them.

"Where to next?" Darko asks Nigel in the passenger seat, pointing to a coffee shop on the way that they do indeed stop by.

"We're going to the fucking library."

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"Does this have something to do about your— argh, little mouse?" Darko grouses when they're just starting to climb the steps of the New York Public Library. The marble building stands grand and stately, and Nigel gets the distinct, palpable feeling of stepping in on historied ground.

"He's not— shut the fuck up," Nigel bites back, shoving a fist into his partner's chest to get him to pause for a moment. There's a kid of about five near the entrance, alone, a pile of puke and a yellow *Caution! Cuidado!* sign right next to her. They stand and stare for a tense, honed-in second, both looking around for any signs of a parent or guardian while she wails and screams herself red.

They both catch sight of a frazzled-looking brunette with fluffy, long hair walking towards them all with a be-speckled little librarian on her coattails. Both men carry on after relaxing over it, searching for the clerk's desk where they can get their library cards.

"What would he be, then, in your opinion? Bunny rabbit? A very cute little kitty cat?"

"I'm not going to compare anyone to animals with you, shut your fucking mouth already," Nigel snipes back, pushing his way through and looking. Why did he bring Darko again? What good reason did he have, earlier in the day?

They find what they're looking for, and he stands in line to get his library card. To his surprise, Darko signs up to get one for himself, too.

"They have books on tape." he explains noncommittally with a wandering eye.

Next, they break apart on their own journeys and move through the library. The interior of the place is insane, with rows and rows of heavy, rich-wood desks and tall, beautiful displays of carefully-organized subject matter. Nigel has an idea of what he's looking for, and ends up

picking two books he's read before, and three that he hasn't. Then, he plucks his way over towards the entirely humongous, overwhelming sections of the Sciences.

He can see why Adam would have preferred not going to this particular location. Although the wide selection was (apparently) one of the best in literally all of America, it was a Saturday afternoon and the place was *packed*.

Tours and tours of sight-seers, whole high school and college classes, and general visitors clogged all around the main areas. There were little to no free seats available, and he couldn't even appreciate the arts on display for how many people swarmed around them.

When he finds what he's looking for, he looks for Darko instead. It takes him twenty minutes to find him, though, because he's sitting cross-legged on the floor in between indiscriminate shelves with a pile of magazines spread all around him like playing cards.

"Hey. Ready to go?" he asks with several thick books tucked underneath his elbow. Darko looks up at him, grinning like a kid.

"Did you know we used to collect every edition of *Hot Rod Magazine* that we could, when we were kids?" he asks, referencing he and his siblings and their father. He holds an old, ratty magazine covered in plastic up for Nigel to see.

"These things were so… *fucking* hard to get back home, it was like winning the lottery every single time." Nigel stays quiet, but appreciates the little bit of nostalgia shared. He gets slowly, slowly down to the ground too, grunting when he sets his back up against one heavy shelf. In near silence, they pick apart their spoils and share little interesting, funny, or gruesome tidbits from them as they read.

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There is a moment of visceral, white-cold panic that grips him on one Thursday evening when, out of the corner of his eye, he sees a crown of curly brown hair. Nigel veers off from behind the bar, climbing up half-steps towards the back end of this room and being fed out to the other side. He scans the mingling crowd of Thursday-nighters here for *Ladies Night!* and spots the color-blasted cream color of a knit sweater in the crowd.

No fucking way. No *goddamn* way.

Nigel locks himself in the walk-in fridge, hearing the rush of blood storm between his ears. There was no way. There wasn't, was there? Adam wouldn't have brought himself back here, it *had* to be somebody-fucking-else. By the time he's talked himself down from pulling out his phone and buying a one-way ticket to Nevada to extricate himself from the very grounds Adam may walk upon, he's reasoned well-enough that the kid would never do something so stupid as to show up. Here, of all the places to be. He *hates* bars and clubs, he'd said so himself, and there would simply be no, logical reason.

By the time Katie comes in for a restock on fresh mint and tonic, he busies himself by pretending to count and catalogue their stock, feeling grateful for the intense, blowing chill all around him.

“Hey,” she says, noting that there’s no clipboard in his hand while he palms the jalapeños. “You good?”

“Yes,” he sighs under his breath. She shrugs one shoulder, lets the door shut behind her on her way out.

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It happens two more times, where he sees someone who might look, *maybe, vaguely* like Adam. Nigel has the same reaction, getting squicked out and holing himself up in the office for over an hour each time.

If there’s even a *modicum* of possibility that it is Adam, then he has to play this very carefully. Does Adam not know he works here, that the likelihood of Nigel being here is almost a guaranteed 85, 90%? Jesus fuck, how can he pass by him without scaring the ever-living-daylights out of him, if that’s the case? He lays his forehead on the desk, rapping it down a couple of times for the feel and sound, thinking, *thinking*.

It’ll be fine, he decides. There’s no way it would be Adam. That would be insane, and Nigel knows insane. Adam is careful and smart, knows how to keep himself away from the places he doesn’t like or shouldn’t be at. It just wouldn’t make sense.

A wrap of knuckles against his door. He gruffs out, “What?” still keeping his forehead planted to the desk-sized calendar laid out before him.

Maria pops her head in, her brown ponytail swinging on beyond her. “Hi. Somebody is here asking for you.”

“Tell them I’m not here,” Nigel growls, sitting up and leaning back in his chair. If any salesperson or new apply bothers his staff, they all know to defer them to the bar’s homepage where they can find Nigel’s work email and the bar’s landline, and *not* hold up foot-traffic for total bullshit. Suspicion crawls up the back of his neck while he watches Maria open the door wider and lean up against its frame.

“He was here asking for you a couple of days ago, too, when you weren’t here. Maybe he wants to apply, aaand is just very eager?”

Nigel had never gotten any emails on application inquiries. He’s checked, and recently, too.

“Maybe.” Nigel says, secretly knowing, and torn on what to do.

“Can you just come talk to him? I feel like I’ve seen him hovering around a few times, and I honestly don’t get the vibe that he’s actually… trying to apply.” She gets out with a breath, squinting her left eye. She was telling him the truth on what she felt, he sees, asking just this once that they deviate from the norm.

Nigel sighs, feels adrenaline pump into his stomach and through his system before he deigns to answer her. He rises with a creak of his chair, starts to follow Maria out after office and down the white-walled hallways of the back of the club.

He knows it’s Adam the second they walk out. He’s across from the whole bar, the crowd not high and mighty enough to swallow up the sight of him sitting at a barstool with his back to them. His legs bounce or swing every couple of moments, and he sucks on the straw of something lit-up bright green and blue, whenever the lights hit it.

“Has he been drinking?” Nigel asks Maria, with a note of panic tingeing his voice. She looks over to him as if surprised, saying,

“No, he’s been here for like, twenty minutes before he walked up to this bar to sit down and wait. I think he got a Sprite.” She shrugs. He hopes she’s right, but also doubts that Adam would be drinking before meeting Nigel head-on. Still though, people were fucking complicated, and this must be a scary fucking scenario for Adam to put himself into, despite all that’s happened so far.

Taking a bit of courage from this act of Adam’s alone, Nigel parts from her side in a long, trying-to-be-sure stride, going to walk behind the bar where Katie shakes two drinks. She grins at Nigel for a second, turning around to focus on her task at hand. Nigel feels sick the moment Adam realizes who’s in front of him, for the way he sits up rod-straight, both hands cupped around his ice-cold glass.

He doesn’t know what to say, or how to start this. Doesn’t know if Adam has this all planned out in his head. When the silence stretches on too long between them as to border beyond uncomfortable, Nigel gets out,

“Hi, Adam.”

A visible shiver runs through Adam’s core at the sound of Nigel’s voice. He bites the inside of his cheek, trying to ignore the nervous way Adam’s fingers play over the condensation.

“Hello, Nigel.”

The silence stretches again, it’s almost unbearable this time. Was this all it was? Hello, I’m here, you’re here, and that’s it, good-bye? What the *Hell* was Adam *doing* here?

Before Nigel can blurt out that very same line of questioning, Adam beats him to it.

“I’d like to- to talk to you, if you,” he stammers, “if you have time. To talk to me.” His eyes flit all around, not seeming to be able to land on any one thing. “I know you’re- you’re busy, working, but-“

He can't believe his ears, or this plane of existence, or of what Adam seems to be asking of him. He feels like he's in a big tub of goo, suffocating and free-floating. He wants to talk? To Nigel? For *what*?

Distinctly, he knows what, but *why*? He needs a second, just a single second to compose himself, 'cause his heart's right in his throat at seeing Adam sit casually, nervously, at his barstool. Both of them look like they might actually throw up.

"Can you—" Nigel starts, leaning with both hands wide on the counter out of habit. When Adam cows a little at that, he pulls back by a fraction, cursing himself for the thoughtlessness, "Can you give me ten minutes? I need to— wrap something up, just- just ten minutes?" He asks, knowing for the world that he doesn't deserve it, but hoping beyond that that Adam will give it to him anyways.

Adam does seem to take this a bit badly, his face scrunching up as if he's about to contest it.

"I promise, ten— fucking, *five* minutes, Adam, and then you can have my undevided fucking attention." He bites himself for the expletives that jump from of his mouth, for the way it makes Adam's cheek muscles flinch.

"You can get anything you want," Nigel says, "On me. Just— please?"

Adam seems to consider this, spinning his glass slowly while he blinks over the dark buttons in Nigel's shirt. He wears square black trousers and a tucked-in, overlarge dress shirt, black with bloodorange blossoms scratched into the fabric. He stares at all of this, at the tattoos on Nigel's hands, the one on his inner arm, and nods gravely like he wants to do anything but.

"Thank you," Nigel breathes, going to Katie to whisper in her ear. "He needs another soda. He's not drinking, is he? Whatever the fuck he's having, put it on me, but pour the fucking shots at half if you can."

She throws over her shoulder, blinking up at Nigel, "He hasn't been, but- all sounds good, no problem."

He bolts from her side after thanking her, going back the winding way to his office and slamming the door shut. He's got four minutes to- what? He grabs for his wallet and keys first, tucking them away in one pocket while he stashes cigarettes in the other. He smoothes his hair back, wafting the collar of his shirt up first to make sure he doesn't smell like kitchen grease or spilled alcohol. Then, for the second time, he makes his way back to Adam's side, this time on the other side of the bar. He hovers nearby, calls out just loud enough to say,

"Okay." He stalls, then says, "Thank you. Where—?"

"Can we go outside?" The question mirrors Darko's from way before, when he'd first talked to his friend about this entire predicament. His heart flutters with fear over the request, but he pushes it down regardless. He wasn't going to do anything to spook Adam, and if he wants to go outside, then they can.

They walk out the front door of the club, and walk a little distance down the street together.

The evening is late and overdark, lit only in some places by neon and yellow glows. Nigel does his best to keep his left leg creaking in cadence to his right, his spine as straight as a rod with his shoulders pulled back. Adam walks with his hands folded in front of him, then one in a pant pocket, unsure where to put them but not wanting to cross his arms over his chest just yet.

Adam spots a bench he's familiar with on his walk by the club from last time. He points to it silently, then with a little sound from the back of his throat.

"Here?" he asks next, stalling. Nigel holds his hand out first, acquiescing and taking Adam's slow-paced lead. They sit, Adam to the center of his side of the bench as Nigel lets half his thigh hang off the edge of his portion.

Adam is the first to speak, and what he has to say spins Nigel's head clean off. "With an injury like yours, the likelihood of survival is incredibly low. Basically," he chances a glance in Nigel's direction. "You're supposed to be dead."

There's a long pause after Adam says that, Nigel nearly blinking himself into a fit.

He clears his throat a little, then says, "What?"

"I… Um,"

Adam tries to calm his shaky breathing. This could all, he knows, go very badly after all.

"With a head injury like what you've sustained, i-in 2013," as if Nigel doesn't remember, "the chances of survival are extremely low. There are a couple of different reports in terms of rates of survival, ranging from 42 - 98% chance of death before reaching the hospital.

You, um—" Adam pauses, tasting the silence for a few bare moments, waiting for Nigel to freak out. For all intents and purposes, and with how media and online news articles had painted him, there was no way around not saying it: Nigel was a criminally, earnestly dangerous man for him to be sitting right next to.

Yet, Nigel just stays sitting there, thoughts sparking like TNT over how Adam knows all of this, of what he's really saying, reeling over what else he might know. Strangely encouraged by Nigel's state of comatose, Adam continues,

"You spent a year in the medical ward while being institutionalized, after being arrested for-" Adam takes a shallow breath, "Racketeering, money laundering, and large-scale drug smuggling," his teeth chatter in a quick tap, "b-but… you… never got charged for manslaughter. Even though that had been a point of contention during your trial." His heart doesn't pound quick in his throat like he thought it would, and it all feels like a chill running through his veins, like his body was pumping him full of adrenaline in the event that he'd need to run again.

But, as he stares straight ahead now at the sleepy street beyond them, his acute awareness of his proximity to Nigel intensifies, feeling for his emotions like he were trying to catch bugs with a bubble-wand.

Cars, mostly taxis or expensive, sleek luxury vehicles, vroom late in the night. Nigel is still, silent, but his hands are folded, softened eyes staring down at his lap while he listens.

“You spent six years in prison after that.” Adam breathes, palms swampy with sweat.

“Officially, though, when you were shot by police, it was pronounced in local and nation-wide news that Nigel Banyai, leader in part of an international drug-trafficking organization, was dead.

When you were processed in prison, though, your name was changed. To… Adrian Calboreneu.” He had practiced this word. He’d practiced it a hundred times since reading and re-reading news articles and watching Romanian news reports. He’d had to translate a lot of them into English himself to understand, as they’d rarely had subtitles except for larger news stations posting Breaking News coverages to their social medias.

“It isn’t clear to me why they would—… pronounce you dead, but still process and book you?” It sounds like a question, but Nigel doesn’t seem to be taking them right now. Adam takes another breath in, and finally, he chances another glance towards the man.

Then, when Adam doesn’t continue, and as if the words feel so very good for him to speak out loud, Nigel says,

“Go on, Adam… Keep going. You’re fucking… on the mark so far.” Whatever he’s feeling is some mix in-between fear, and awe, and that same emotion you feel when tonguing at a tooth that’s just about to fall out. Stinging, blissful pain, an entirely cleansing kind of thing when you can finally spit it bloody into the sink.

Adam nods again then, looking away and clasping his hands together in his lap. It’s cold tonight, but it feels good. Adam knew he would be so nervous getting out the first part, because after having learned all this, he wasn’t entirely certain how Nigel would react. Being attentive and interested in someone at a bar was one thing. Shoving their otherworldly, criminally dangerous anti-history right in their face like Adam was… It was another thing entirely.

Still though, in doing all of this research, he couldn’t help but shake the image of Nigel that had begun to form in his mind. Which is why he was here, why he needed more clarity, why he needed Nigel to answer his questions.

“Why did you get caught?” Adam asks, really looking for an answer this time. “Why did they change your name, and still process you through? You had a sentence of 14 years, but got out eight years early. Why?”

“Could I have a cigarette?” Nigel asks, motioning over to the side of them. He meets Adam’s gaze head-on, and neither of them break for even a moment.

“… Yes.” He’s not upset that Nigel’s smoking near him. In fact, there’s a little part in the back of his brain that anticipates the smell of Nigel’s cigarettes. It’s still acrid and biting, but different somehow. Adam wonders belatedly if it’s the brand, or if Nigel rolls the tobacco himself.

What stalls him is his fear that Nigel won't end up answering him. Would he just get up and leave during the perfect opportunity? He certainly could, he might be faster than Adam, and he's certainly taller, potentially— no, *reliably*, more violent.

Adam could find him at the club again, but that might cause a scene, and he was really hoping that that potential possibility on how this all goes can be avoided entirely. He was banking all of this, absolutely all of tonight, on the consistent show of patience and attention Nigel had paid him that very first time.

'World's full of people where all they want to do is take advantage. Up to you to clock it and stay the Hell out of their way.'

That's what Nigel had said to him, the first time. It's also, essentially and to the bones, what Harlan had told him, too.

So many questions, and Adam felt like Nigel owes these answers to him, like the gift of one shiny, new book for the ordering and borrowing of another. There were other reasons he was here, too, but Adam was decidedly undecided on these particular parts, just yet.

When Nigel rises up from the bench, Adam holds in a silent breath. He watches with the anticipation of total backfire as Nigel meanders to the left of them, pulling out from his back pocket a pack of cigarettes and a light blue lighter.

"What was the first thing you asked?" he says first, puffing on it to catch it, mumbling through his words. He squints at Adam in the dark, "Why was I caught?"

Adam loses the breath he'd been holding in one, warm gust. It makes a sound, and Nigel cocks his head to the side, smoking.

"Yes." he confirms after a moment of reeling himself back in. He figures out that he can stare head-on at Nigel this way, in the night, watching the glow from his cigarette rise and fall in intervals. "How did you get caught, and why did they process you after changing your name, and— how, why did you get out early?"

Nigel nods, kicking out his shoe. "I got caught because of a— a stupid, fucking American."

"Charlie," Adam guesses, then adds, "Countryman."

After a moment of silence, Nigel says, "Yes."

"They got married. Charlie and Gabrielle."

Nigel lifts one hand to his face, pinching between his eyebrows. "Adam." He twists out, with very much gravity in this. "You're kind of… derailing me here."

"Sorry," he quips, pressing his mouth together in a tight line. He was looking for a reaction of some kind at the mention of Gabi, but he doesn't know how to read this particular one.

"It's okay. I didn't know— well, it- it doesn't matter. That's great," he sighs like the weight of the world is off his shoulders all the sudden.

“They have kids, two, but they did just recently separate. If that— if that makes you feel any better.”

A laugh barks out of Nigel then, and he takes a drag once he fishes that back in. “Adam, seriously. I really don’t need the details.”

“Did you not know?”

“Adam, please.” He says, dropping his cigarette down on the ground. He steps on it, then says,

“The topic at hand? Name change, fucking— early release?” Adam blinks at him. Nigel gruffs,

“No, I didn’t know. And I don’t need to know. I’m happy that they’ve— I don’t know, fucked off and made their own mess of things. Good for them. It’s not in my realm of the things imperative for me to know. Or think about. So, please,” he repeats, as if this is a word he says all the time, and lately, he really has.

Adam doesn’t press that detail any longer. Instead, he asks, “Are you coming back?”

When Nigel stalls at this, it’s because it takes him a second to process what he means. He steps carefully back to the bench as if counting each step, one by one, then sits himself down next to Adam with both elbows resting on the bench back.

He lets his hands falls down into his lap, next. “So, the fucking American.” he begins again. “Charlie fucking Countryman.”

He tells Adam the order of events in how he’d met his ultimate demise, back in Bucharest. He told him about how the bullet went through at *just* the perfect angle so as not to immediately, permanently knock him dead. He’d coded though for sure, on the way to the hospital, but they wanted him to stand trial. Nigel’s bloody, seizing body gave them some glimmer, some spark of hope to the paramedics and hospital staff that he *would* be saved, not could, and they better damn well rush to it before their chance at trialing him slipped away.

They’d wanted him in prison. But, so did the Americans, because of Charlie Countryman’s involvement that night. He told Adam that he had beaten Charlie within an inch of his life, not going into very great detail, but ensuring Adam understood that Nigel knew exactly what he was doing punching and stringing the daylights out of him.

The U.S. wanted to ensure proper payback. If Nigel Banyai of Bucharest, Romania, survived the night after being shot in the head, he would be carted off to America to stand trial for the forty-five years or more that he owed them.

For the first three months during his recovery from surgery, Nigel was learning how to swallow again, how to sit up, how to hold a pencil and write his fake name down. By month nine, he was fighting to start walking again. Like a madman thrown to the floor, or, one that could claw tooth and nail to get right back up again. In the next four months after that, he’d told Adam, they’d written out that he was fit enough to be moved into General Population.

In any case, what he'd worked out once his skull no longer had a bullet-sized peephole threading through it, was that Nigel had made a lot of big fucking mistakes up until that point. It shouldn't have taken him so very long to realize it, and there were many bumps along the way where he could've willingly fallen from the wagon, set himself onto a path of freedom away from heavy metal or the taste of blood from constant fighting, always fighting.

Nigel supposes he got fucked up more than ever on the product he and his team were keen on testing themselves, too. Can't be the best if they don't know for sure whether or not they are the best, right? Coked out of his gourd as a long-time, dangerous, experienced criminal, he had acted with an insane, utterly intense amount of misguided anger towards the people who later, he realized, hadn't actually deserved a single ounce of it.

Gabi had been scared of him, he realized about a year and a half into his sentence. She'd been afraid. Of him, for him, and he'd made her life a living Hell for it all. And then to mix up Charlie on top everything, too…

He tells Adam that he'd found out later that Darko had paid the Bucharest PD to pronounce Nigel dead, change his name under the hospital's care, and let the Romanian Judicial System process him internally, '*so they can still feel like they did something*.' They, Darko included, threw him in to rot for fourteen years, over the charges that Adam pointed out earlier.

"Would you believe I got out on good behavior?" Nigel lilts, pursing his lips a little as he thinks about it. Adam frowns, not really knowing the answer to the question.

When Nigel doesn't answer it either, Adam asks, "Did you?"

"Sort of," his head nods to the side. "Darko spent his six years continuing business without me. Says it was the roughest, most unorganized shit he'd ever seen. Fights amongst our crew, shipments being sent and sussed out almost immediately. Lot of people went to jail during those times, or just ended up— fucking, dead," he breathes, rubbing both hands behind his neck as he remembers.

"I hadn't heard from him in something like— five years. Something like that. He poked and prodded where he could, and ended up using half of his and my shared assets to grease the wheels for an early release date."

"And so you came *here*?" Adam asks in surprise. "Don't you think if you were to be seen *here*, in America, you might be under some type of danger of being discovered?"

"Adam, this was seven years ago. The amount of times I've ever seen a Romanian news report here, ever, has been never. No, I'm not worried, because for the most part, we've kept everything neat and tidy since being here."

"But- but there were American news reports about it, too. I mean, it- they mostly focused on Charlie Countryman, and your-… death. But! Still!"

"Adam, where was I going to go? Fucking *France*?" he asks, crossing his arms over his chest. "You couldn't pay me, not a billion fucking dollars, to move to Poland, either."

He deflates a little. “Isn’t Poland pretty?”, referencing its world-renowned pension for fantastic stargazing.

“I need more than pretty in my life, Adam. Fuck Poland. I got a second, stupid fucking chance at redoing this whole thing, and I— I didn’t want to mess it up.” It goes unspoken that he has, for the ripples of invisible tension that had been strung up between them despite their separation from each other since that first night.

Adam has points to hit though, so when Nigel about finishes his version of how things had escalated and settled, he pipes back up,

“You have one Facebook created in 2009 under your real name, but there really aren’t very many updates there beyond what I can tell must be family connections. No social media under your new name, except for two LinkedIn accounts. On one of them, your new last name is misspelled.” He tells him, looking towards his face with an air as if he finds this part a little bit funny.

Nigel blows out a raspberry. “My niece made me make the stupid fucking Facebook. Never even used it. She liked to… She loved posting for that kind of thing.”

“Oh.” Adam answers back, almost tonelessly in his care for the word. “Is she…?”

“No, no. She’s, she’s just back home. She’s with my mother. Good kid.” Adam nods, trailing his eyes away as he files this bit of information away.

“Your LinkedIn’s have the same photo, but the one that’s misspelled says you’ve been here for over 15 years.” He tells Nigel, who just snorts derisively.

“Yeah, that’s… fucking Romanian-grade hackers and cheats for you, I suppose. Greatest fucking country in the world but we still can’t figure out how to cover tracks so very well. And I’m sure whoever doctored those two profiles up didn’t give a fuck about their mistakes. We take checks and break them, Adam, and usually the story ends fucking there.” he muses, knowing that’s not enough of an explanation.

“Did you see ever me? When I showed up?” Adam asks suddenly, throwing Nigel for another conversational loop that instantly grounds his previous suspicions in one, dizzying swoop.

He’d refused to believe it, but whenever he considered the possibility that Adam was there (which couldn’t, *shouldn’t*, even be possible), he’d thought again, well, maybe the kid didn’t know he fucking worked there. Which was just terrible on its own, because there was no Goddamn *way* Adam would come back there of his own volition if he knew Nigel would be there. God, right? *Right*?

His truth spills out like an eternal relief though, and instead of all of the crazy shit he wants to spout, Nigel says, “I could pick you out of a fucking line-up, Adam,” his voice goes again all gravelly, dark, honest. Adam lets the sound wash through him, til he speaks up again,

“I could pick you out of an entire fucking… crowd of people.” He says it like he’s angry about it, almost. “That’s how—...” Cuts himself off, chuckles dryly over it. He points into the

air with his index finger next, says,

“*Fuck*, I could pick you out of a fucking… Adam impersonation group.” He snorts again, finding all of this really, direly, unfortunately funny. Then, the word alone, he sighs, “Adam…” *Please* sticks on his tongue, but he feels so unsure of how to speak it.

He says it anyway, begging, “Please, just. Let’s both stay on— on our own sides of New York. Yeah? You’ll never have to fucking run into me again. I-“ he shakes his head, looking down at his own turned-in shoes.

“I promise, Adam. The last thing I want to do is to—“ he pauses, hearing the *thwack* of Adam’s head against brick and shuddering shoulderly over it, eyebrows synching together as if in mortal pain. The amount of actual, physical, mortal pain he’s caused others, and *this* is what haunts him?

“What would be-“ Adam interrupts Nigel’s turmoil, asking, “our sides of New York?”

Nigel leans back into the back of the bench now, breathing out his nose as he thinks. “*That*.” he swings an arm in the general direction of the club.

“That is my side of New York. This,” he motions all over the rest, every direction but that point southward, “Is yours. I—“ he pauses, eyes closing briefly as he licks his dry lips, shaking his head again. “You just… need to let me get over it. I promise I will.”

An inkling of something trickles into Adam then, as he tries to understand. “Get over what?”

“This,” he motions around them with one hand flat and swiveling in the air, “You. I-… I promise that I can. It just… It takes time. We just— we can let it lie.”

“Get over me… how, Nigel?” Adam asks quietly, though he has suspicions on what Nigel might mean. Like when they tell you (the internet) that it’s normal to be emotionally distressed after a some big break up, or falling out. He had waited and waited to miss Beth, to think of her all of the time or be reminded of her by every-day things. He’d found that he hadn’t with her, but dissimilarly, couldn’t stop drawing back to this man right next to him.

“Adam,” Nigel groans, as if this is just now becoming the most exceutiating part of the conversation for him.

“*Because*,” Nigel grinds back, “What the Hell did I tell you the first time? Adam… If— If somebody takes advantage of you, then you don’t go back for more.” Suddenly, this sentiment reminds Adam of Beth. Of how she forced him out of his comfort zone in ways that were damaging to him, even til this day. He wonders more on this thought, but makes an active effort to train his attention back to Nigel while he keeps on speaking.

When he tunes back in, what he says next reminds him of what Harlan had told him. “You have to be careful of people, Adam. The fact that you knew all of this and still showed up is —“ he has no words, because he’s all kinds of fucked up over it.

To be under Adam's gaze feels flaying, and at the same time, so very, direly sweet. It feels so good to see him, to watch the careful concentration on his face or the way he lights up with curiosity, or twitching away a hidden smile.

It feels good too, to have someone know his story so well. How much research had Adam done on him? What else did he know? He was still here by Nigel's side, despite it all, despite what'd happened, and Nigel felt like each interaction mattered more than the last.

Then, as if reminded that he hasn't said it yet, he tells Adam, "I'm so fucking sorry. I'm *so* fucking sorry, Adam." He doesn't specify for which part, but he supposes for all of it; for not being clear, or asking Adam if he'd wanted to be kissed; if he had wanted Nigel in his space like that at all. Sorry for being the big, scary boogeyman that slinks out-of-sight around Maine street, the rat underneath the floorboards of a year-round haunted house.

Nigel loses his fire then, leaning forward on his elbows. His shoulders rise, and Adam watches the bulk of muscle just underneath the black, silky fabric of his dress shirt.

Silence hangs in the air between them, but it's neither heavy nor soft. The whistle and tweet of bugs can be heard every now and then, as well as the audible ... *Wait…!* signal as far-away passerbyers use it to drunkenly cross the street.

"All I could think about this entire time is of you being scared… How fucking horrible is that? I've—… For the first time ever, I've gotten to live a life where I know that at the end of the day, nobodies going to be fucking. *Dying*. Or shot, or captured. And when— when that happened, with us, it felt like…" *Thwack*, Adam's head hits the brick behind Nigel's eyes. He starts to go pale, bloody memory and bloody emotion mixing so close that it's hard to distinguish between memories in that moment.

"You…" Adam begins, trying to break through their combined reverie. "You scared me." He admits. "I… Hadn't been expecting it, any of it, but I—…" He pulls himself up tighter on the bench, crossing one leg over then pulling it up when it isn't comfortable. "I felt really scared… of you, and confused, a-and everything was so complicated with Beth…"

Nigel listens, only a frustrated click of his tongue at the mention of Beth. Not of the woman herself, but of the *implication* of her. She, he won't forget, reoccurringly seemed to walk all over Adam without a care in the world about it.

"The last thing I wanted to do was scare you." Nigel tells him again, somber over it.

"… I know that now. I… Believe you." Adam admits. He swings his curled-up leg a little, from side to side, a light feeling swirling in his guts at their shared admissions coming up to something like a crescendo.

"Thank you, Nigel." he says, because it's the polite thing to do in return for all of this patience and research-backed honesty, and, because he means it.

Nigel wipes a hand over his face, overwarm and overwhelmed all of the sudden. "You too, Adam. Thank you. I'm… just, sorry."

“You don’t have to apologize again,” Adam replies quietly. Then, as if an idea strikes him, he whips in his seat a little to face Nigel. “Oh!” He’d had this thought earlier last week, and only considered it depending on how things went. He grins, a nervous and excited thing, then holds out his hand for Nigel to take.

When the implications of what he means to get from Nigel are not clear, Adam waves his outstretched hand in the air. With his own air of dire importance, he says clearly, “Hello, Nigel. My name is Adam Raki. It’s- it’s very nice to meet you.” Understanding dawns on him, and Nigel hangs his head with a withering groan.

“Adam, *no*. No. Don’t fucking— tell me anything,” he pleads. “I’ll never fucking forget anything you ever tell me, and I *don’t need*—“

“My name is Adam Raki,” Adam says again, ignoring Nigel and wiggling his fingers mid-air. Nigel glares down at his shoes, mind whirring through all the different possibilities on how to spell ‘Raki.’ Rakey? Reikie? Raeighkeigh? American names were ridiculous.

But just so they can get this fucking over with, Nigel takes a deep breath in and swallows. He stares at Adam head on, then locks his eyes on the hand outstretched to him. Skin muted by the blanket of night, he knows before grasping it that Adam’s hand will be soft. He prickles a little over his own callouses, how his hands might be dry, or his knuckles and fingers too big, too crooked from getting snapped over and over and over again. But they fit together just fine, and Nigel gives him the benefit of a good, firm handshake.

“Nigel Banyai.” he answers back with more surety in his voice than he thought he had. He hasn’t said his own name like that, out loud, in several years.

“It’s… It’s nice to meet you.” Adam repeats, seeming to go a little flush under his windbreaker at Nigel’s sudden intensity.

A couple moments pass when their hands fall to their laps, Adam twitching minutely in his position towards Nigel like he wants to move around.

“Could we talk about what happened?” Adam asks softly, next, like he’s afraid the answer will somehow be ‘no.’ This is probably the scariest question he’d came prepared with. He watches Nigel, unafraid for the way his shoulders roll or when he runs his fingers through his hair. Nigel wasn’t going to hurt him, or yell at him, or run away from him. Of this, he was now 100% certain.

“Yeah, Adam… Do you… Want me to start?”

Adam nods, even though he has his own entire part of it planned. He wants to hear Nigel’s side of it, too, and knows he’ll be able to say his own piece no matter the answer.

“I…” He begins, and Jesus fuck, is this the longest night of his life. Of their life? He can’t imagine Adam Raki, staying up in the wee hours of the night, waxing prose over the destruction of one life to another. Yet,

“I saw you.” Nigel starts. “With your friends, and it was— you were really…” he doesn’t know how to explain, but he can try. “You looked so happy, like you were having so much fun, and you were so fucking… *cute*.” Adam tightens his mouth a little, suppressing the tiny smile flitting over it for a pass. “I wanted to talk to you, and when we did, I couldn’t get you out of my head.

I knew you were with your friends, but, you guys always seemed to be having some sort of drawback or… Not argument. You know what I mean.” Adam nods, understanding perfectly well the grating experience that was he, Beth, and her friends together under one roof. “And I just wanted to make sure you were all good, but I also just couldn’t… stop… fucking… wanting to be near you.

“So I,” he shakes his head, remembering the burning sensation of wanting to speak to Adam again, of being in his presence, of testing his reactions or trying to ask after whether he was taken or not. “I have to say, I’ve really never actually read somebody as badly as I read you. And that’s my fucking fault, Adam, not yours.” He tries to meet Adam’s gaze for the sincerity of it, but Adam won’t meet his back. He listens, though, and considers, and only glances up when he wants Nigel to continue.

“I hadn’t intended to take it that far, I just— got really wrapped up. In the moment? And I— I’m…”

“You had something shiny.” Adam murmurs before Nigel can apologize again. “You were looking at me like you— wanted to… I don’t know. *Eat me*, it felt like, and I… have trouble with eye contact, so looking down was much easier.” His face heats as he recalls the memory of Nigel’s soft, natural pout, the flash of something sparkling striking every time he’d shown his teeth.

Sudden realization dawns on Nigel. *Something shiny*. “The *tooth gems*,” is what he says out loud. Groaning, he continues, “The girls applied these fake fucking— gems or whatever, to everyone, like, a week and half prior to that night for some fucking disco night we had. That shit *never comes off*… God, that makes so much fucking sense.” It’s horrible, all of it, but at least it makes *sense*. Adam hadn’t been looking at his mouth because he’d wanted Nigel to kiss him. It was so simple that it almost made him feel hollow.

“Nigel, I still think…” Adam starts, sensing where his mind might be going. “I still think, in some way, I knew that I was… *intrigued*… by you. But… Because I was with Beth, and because Id never… been with, or thought about another man like that before, I just didn’t… My brain,” he tries to explain, while in the meantime Nigel is wrapping up Adam’s little confession neatly into a small box and hiding it in his heart forever, likely never to resurface. Adam continues, “It just doesn’t work quite the same.”

“With Beth?” Nigel catches on, tone flattening from the way his brain fizzles out into smush.

“With Beth.” Adam confirms, not expanding further.

“Like, with her, with her? As in, you guys were together?”

“Were together,” he parrots back with a jerky little nod. “We broke up soon after, because I—well, I needed to tell her what had happened. That I, with or without meaning to, had… cheated, on her.”

God *damnit*. How could any of this possibly get worse? Nigel’s about to stand, walk around, get this suddenly-roaring nervous energy out of his system by running marathons around Downtown, when Adam cuts in,

“Ultimately, I found that it was best that we seperated. We weren’t… she wasn’t…” he pauses, looking for the words. He finds them.

“… Kind, to me. She always tried to force me into seeing things *her* way, no matter what it was about, that I… I think I lost a lot of what, or who, I was when I was with her.” He trails off on this thought, and lets Nigel stew on his words for a while. Nigel could see that Adam’s sentiment on this was true, even before he’d spoken it. He could sense that Beth had been pulling him in all sorts of directions that night, and it had invigorated him even more to be by Adam’s side, distracting him from it as much as he could.

“Also,” he says, almost as an after-thought, “I stopped drinking. Entirely. I don’t,” his face screws up, “like it, and there was no point on doing it anymore if she wasn’t around.”

Nigel feels something like pride tug in his lower belly, warm and bright and soft. “That—…” he clears his throat, “That’s good.” He wants to say he’s proud of Adam, but doesn’t think he needs to hear that from him. Sincerely though, he settles on, “I’m happy for you. That’s really great, Adam.”

The other nods, murmuring his thanks.

“What is it that’s… different?” Nigel asks then, in reference to what Adam always alludes to whenever he talks about himself, his brain.

“What is it, like, what’s wrong with me?”

“Well, no. Not. Nothing’s *wrong* with you, Adam, but you keep fucking vaguely mentioning shit about your brain and I. I don’t know what you mean.” He pauses, frowning, admitting, “I-… I want to know.”

Without more than a moment’s consideration, Adam tells him, “I’m diagnosed autistic. When I was a child, I was labeled with Aspergers Syndrome, but that term is outdated for several reasons, namely because the doctor who coined the term is a renowned Nazi.” he pauses, let’s that sink in, then says,

Adam nods, eyes glued to his knees. “It just means I have certain behaviors that are unlike, or —… dissimilar, to other ‘neurotypical’ people.” He air-quotes for Nigel, hoping to get his point across.

“I… See. I think I understand. That,” he nods slowly, “I guess that sort of makes sense.”

“I need clear, direct communication. I often times misunderstand that other people feel or even think the same exact way I do. It took me a long time to even begin distinguishing when people are being true, or joking, or… or if they’ve got some sort of ulterior motive toward me.”

“Would you say that you’re easily trusting?” Nigel almost growls out. He means it as a barb, feeling like he knows the answer already and feeling disappointed in both of them for it.

“… Sometimes. But I’ve also learned how to take steps back to calculate on my *own*,” he says with some conviction, “on whether or not somebody is… is bad, for me.”

Nigel blows out a breath, feeling like he knows where this might be going. It’s late. It’s— early. He needs to get Adam home, before this conversation starts to veer a course where both of them doing something, anything, that they might regret.

So he says sincerely, “Thank you for telling me. I knew something was different, but fuck if I’m not different, too.” He hates the shared eye contact they make, breaks it almost immediately as it’d begun. He tries mustering up the courage to end this, to tell Adam that it was time for them to go.

He pipes up, then, a “Well…” like he’s just about to suggest for them to starting picking up. As if his words have finally run out, but, Adam has more to say.

“Could I ask you a question? Please?”

Nigel tenses for a second, feeling the weight of tonight settle around him like seeds of newly planted grasses. He crosses one ankle over the other, the dawn of understanding hitting him that he doesn’t quite know if he can say no to Adam if asks for something, not just yet. He gets out a rough, “Yes. Of course.”

“The- when you first walk into *The Orbit!*, there’s that tunnel display screen set up?” The question sort of throws Nigel for a loop for a second, but he catches up quickly.

“Yes. What about it?”

Adam nods. “Do you know the specifications on how it works? How long did that take to build? Are there cameras involved with a green screen display converting live footage into a galaxy filter, or, or is it some type of heat sensor that has similar processing for when people walk through?”

Nigel’s mouth hangs open for a second, then he admits, “You know, I have the contract information from the guy and his team who planned it out and built it. It is something similar to the first one you mentioned, but, I just don’t know all the details.” He mulls this over for a second, too, wondering how he can pass along that info to Adam if he absolutely wasn’t going to text it to him, and plans of barring Adam from entering the club, later.

He motions with his fingers flapping up for a second, beckoning Adam to grab his phone out.

“Open up a tab, I’ll see if I can remember his business page.”

Adam unlocks his phone and tries to hand it to Nigel, but he refuses it til he motions for Adam to go through and open up a blank browser himself. He plucks it up when offered again, typing in the man's full name into Google and scrolling through the first page of results. He finds the website, *www.fortyfied/electronics.com*. He hands the phone back to Adam, says,

"Their email or contact info should be on there down at the bottom. You can say you know Nigel, or *The Orbit!*, even, doesn't matter. It was a big, fucking expensive-ass ordeal, so they're likely to remember it. And if you name-drop, they'll be more likely to respond quicker."

Adam hums in understanding, flicking through the website and reading up on their *General Information* page. He murmurs his thanks while he reads, and Nigel relaxes back with both arms folded over the top of the bench while Adam investigates.

A few minutes pass of this before Nigel's closes his eyes. He's tired, guessing it's probably closer to 4-fucking-AM than not. He's tired, but he imagines Adam must be even more so.

"I'm guessing it's way past your bed time," he murmurs then, eyes still closed while Adam plugs away.

He hums, a noncommittal sound. "Generally, yes, but," he pauses, "I've sort been of ruining my sleep schedule."

One eye blinks open, casting over to Adam. "Why?"

"I've visited *The Orbit!* nine times in the last two weeks," Adam admits, as if he's not admitting to something incriminating. "Your club opens up just about the time that I get ready for bed, Nigel. I've had to stay up so that I could try and see you. So that we could talk."

"*Nine?!*" Nigel splutters, surging away from his lean like he's been electro-shocked. "*Nine?!*" he parrots again, as if Adam needs him to repeat himself.

Adam's eyes flick nervously over to him, this being the biggest reaction he's pulled from Nigel thus far.

He watches as Nigel leans one hand against the bench to leer over at him. "… Yes. A-are you upset? … You weren't there three times, and I was trying to figure out your schedule but they don't post that kind of thing online."

A crazed, epileptic sound of laughter whistles out of Nigel next. "Adam, fucking—… the one thing stopping you from gaining access to more information being a printed-out post of a fucking *work schedule* is *insane*. We're fucking… Adam, we're fucking *insane*." He laughs out loud again, head back, as if it's the funniest thing in the world, because it *is*.

"What are you, a cop?" he continues to crow. And seriously, after all of tonight, that might actually be a good fucking question for him to ask.

This makes Adam frown, though, shaking his head quickly and with earnest vigor. With tons of seriousness, he says, “I’m— no, Nigel. I’m not a cop.”

He chuckles again, part of him the slightest bit relieved before he’s saying, “No, Adam, I know, sorry,” he wipes away his tears once the laughter dies down, still reeling off of that bright burst of color between them. “God, Jesus. You know. You really are something, you know that?”

“Hmm…” Adam sighs, nodding as if he does know.

After some time, Adam slips his phone away into his pocket, looking as if he’s trying to think of more to say. So, if they were really airing it all out then, Nigel will, too.

“… I went to the, uhh. New York Public Library?” he glances quickly at Adam then, as if afraid to’ve admitted so much, despite all that’d already been said.

“I… You were right. It was really fucking busy, and some kid puked all over the marble floors, at the entrance? It was chaos.” he chuckles a little over it, remembering he and Darko’s dismay. Then,

“But, it was… really beautiful inside. S’ a gorgeous fucking building.”

Adam hums in agreement with him. “It is. Did you know that the author J.K. Rowling wrote nearly the entirety of Harry Potter there?”

A smirk twitches on his mouth, but Nigel shakes his head. “No, I didn’t.”

Adam nods. “She’s had a lot of backlash over the last couple of years for being transphobic, ableist, and whole bunch of other really awful things, but its a very popular book series amongst readers of my age group.”

“Yeah? Did you end up reading it?”

Adam wrinkles his nose, eyes slitting into a glare. “I read the first two, but abandoned the series entirely after that. The writing isn’t very good but I can see why the plot might draw some people in, or become part of their childhood nostalgia if they grew up reading it. The movies are okay. It’s just never been my thing.” Nigel nods. He thinks he’s seen one, maybe two of them (out of order, at that) but he’s recognized the kids who play Ron and Harry in a few other movies that they’ve done in more recent years.

Then, as if the question is nagging to come out, Adam asks, “Did you ever go to Central?”

Did Nigel peruse both buildings, comparing them and going through their aisles, wondering what Adam would have picked to check out, or wondered which spot was his favorite to sit at? Did Nigel look for him at all, and had he ever sat down in the quietest corner, trying to picture what he’d look like there with his nose buried in a heavy-hitting volume.

Nigel makes it as far as looking at the crumpled seam at the side of Adam’s thigh. “No,” he admits back quietly.

“You said you didn’t like the Public Library, and I—… I wanted…” he trails off, licks his lips, tries to order his thoughts into a row that Adam might understand. Shakes his head, gets out, “I felt like I… I missed you so much, and it felt like if I read something that you might’ve liked, that I could try and see why you liked it so much. What about it interested you, wondering what you might think of certain fucking— theories.” He stops himself short, feeling like he’s making a crazed fool of himself.

“What did you read?” Adam asks, voice just as inaudible as Nigel’s.

“Fucking—“ he pinches the bridge of his nose, recalling those titles that he’d brought home with him that day. “The one by Neil, that one guy, the—“

“*To Infinity and Beyond?” Adam gasps out first, one hand planted on the bench in his surprise.*

“Fuck, no, another one—“

“*Death by Black Hole*?” he asks, frowning.

“No, uhhh, it’s the one where he talks about—“

Adam thinks for a bare moment, then guesses, “*Astrophysics for People in a Hurry*?”

“Yes! Yes, that one! I fucking— read that shit *twice* because I didn’t understand it the first time. You read that shit for fun?”

The excited smile Adam gives him shows the top row of all his teeth, and it’s nearly enough to destroy Nigel right then and there. He feels a burn and prickle in his eyes over it, because he never, ever, *ever* thought he’d get to see that again. And even then, those that Adam’d given him the first time they met weren’t like *this*.

An uncomfortable feeling of dread burrows its way into Nigel’s stomach, because he ultimately knows that there’s a timestamp on this. All of it. He would get to watch Adam smile, and listen to him talk a mile a minute (like he is right now, *fuck,* ***pay attention****), but only for a short while more. He needed to get Adam home. It really was getting too late.*

So, whether it was now, in ten minutes, or an hour from now, Adam and Nigel would part their ways. Hopefully, he thinks, for good. For Adam’s own good.

For the better zings through him then, on a staccato repeat. For the better, for the better, let him have his pretty fucking girls, and his uncomplicated, uncompromised life. And distantly, he knows this isn’t quite fair, isn’t quite true. Nobody’s life is perfect, and people are… well, they’re all bit fucking complicated, aren’t they?

But away from him, not with him, not by his side, with absolutely anybody else… That’s what Adam needed most, Nigel was sure of it, even now as he stared on while Adam talked about his the differences between astrophysicists’ theories, and the evolution of those theories.

When this one-sided conversation winds near to a close, Nigel is reposive and content from listening to the dips and inflections of Adam’s voice. It must come to a close, though, and for

this he is certain.

“Adam,” he says quietly, looking to the side of him over at his companion. “I really think it’s about time we go. It’s late.”

Adam sighs at this, long and soft, and then rips into a yawn the next moment after. It makes Nigel’s face break out into a wide, close-mouthed smile, but soon enough he finds himself yawning, too.

“I can call you a cab.” he offers, knowing the local company’s number by heart.

Adam nods slowly, letting his leg fall down so he can stretch out both with an aborted squeak. Nigel pulls out his phone to dial, giving them the cross streets and general direction of where they are.

“He said five minutes,” Nigel murmurs, setting his phone face-up between them.

“Okay…” Adam mumbles, looking like the night was finally catching up to him. It’s probably the cutest, sweetest thing he’s ever seen, and he stamps down the feeling in his chest that bubbles up to try and settle there. After about a minute, they both stand, making a combined effort towards the edge of the dark street ahead.

“Thank you,” Nigel says to him again, quietly. His hands are wrapped around the items in his pockets, and his chest constricts with all the other things he wants to say. Instead, he just repeats, “I’m— Thank you. For coming by. I’m happy you did.”

Adam nods, casting a little, shy smile in Nigel’s shadowed direction. He clips up, “Yes.” and then, “Thank you too for… Not…” he doesn’t finish, too complicated of a thing to get out, but they both shuffle their feet around like they share the same sort of understanding.

Three minutes in, Adam is looking at Nigel like he has one more thing to ask.

“Nigel…” He starts, folding his arms in front of his chest, finally. Guarded, hopeful, and not so very confused as he’d felt before, he gets out waveringly, “Will you… Could you try… again?”

Immediately, Nigel knows what Adam is asking from him. He’s shaking his head no before he can get any words out, but still beats Adam to the punchline when he says, “No, Adam.” His mouth opens, closes. Then, “I… I can’t. We need to let this lie. It’ll- it’ll pass,” he says again, as if he believes it. “I promise, it’ll pass.”

“That’s not what I’m… Please? I’m- I’m asking you.” he emphasizes, turning to face Nigel more head-on. His internal time-clock rings in the back of his mind, knowing the taxi is just on its way here. “I’m asking you.” He repeats, like rainwater pattering across limestone.

“Adam,” Nigel repeats, too, the spoke. word full of more names of emotions than he can even count. Please, the name alone seems to say, I don’t want to mess this up again, ***please****.*

“I’m asking you to.” Adam relays again, more firmly this time, as if he could impart this importance to Nigel just by force of will alone.

Just then, the headlights of a car breaks into their field of vision, pulling onto their street from around a corner. Adam's heart starts to pound with importance, with haste, when he says, "Nigel."

He grabs for one of Adam's hands just then, staring at his expression for when he takes it up. Shocked still by the contact, Adam relaxes down a fraction when Nigel just holds their hands together in the air, between them. He flips Adam's hand palm-down, slowly, steps closer by a half-step only. He leans down, watching for Adam's expression the whole time before his own eyes slide shut.

He presses his mouth the smooth skin just above Adam's middle knuckle, then again, slightly above, across the spot where he feels veins and shifting bone. He stays there, bent over for a moment, before moving to then rest his forehead, the middle of his brows, against that still, perfect hand. He breathes for a second, basks in the simple closeness that he's allowing for the both of them, before a yellow taxi pulls up a just few feet in front of them.

He pulls away, and gently lets their hands drops, standing up straight and unable to look Adam in the eyes, even when Adam goes searching for it.

"That's not what I meant," Adam stresses quietly, feeling the press of time as the taxi idles. "Nigel—"

"I know what you meant, Adam, and I fucking— can't," he breathes back. "Go— experiment… with somebody else." Somebody safer, somebody less complicated, someone that Adam can bring home without fear of it getting messy. The taxi honks then, two short bursts of his horn. Not impatient just yet, but reminding them that time is, in fact, money.

Adam steps closer, ignoring the shrill feeling of time, time, time that presses on his back by the sound of the running engine. "Please," he asks, for the very last time he'll ask.

Nigel stares at him, at the serious, earnest expression on Adam's face. He can say no, he reminds himself, he should say no and start the very process of removing the thought of Adam, like one does to a clump cancerous cells of the brain. He knows that's not accurate, knows it's his own brain that's the problem, but he can't help the magnetic pull forward that Adam seems to emanate like a huge, gaseous superstar.

The taxi honks again, and Nigel just barely has the restraint to not yell out to the driver through his half-open window.

He steps closer to Adam, feeling faint over every one until finally, they're close enough to just barely feel the wash from each other's shallow breathing.

Adam stares up at him intently, unwaveringly, anticipating all-of-the-sudden on getting everything that he'd wanted from this, after all. He thrills silently when Nigel's voice curls out, "Close your eyes, Adam." He can hear another, unspoken please, and does his best to stay as still as possible, eyes coming to close.

Nigel stalls, mapping the relaxed planes of Adam's face in the dark. His eyelashes are short but full, and the curve of his jaw is so artfully made, and only with a hint of stubble from

maybe days without shaving the edges of it.

Adam's eyes open during the pause, and he startles when the taxi honks again. Louder this time, longer, growing more than impatient.

"Close your eyes," Nigel reminds him softly. working up the courage to step closer. Adam does what's been asked of him, shutting his eyes closed again and burning from impatience.

He wants to compare it to the very first time, wants to feel Nigel's hand on the side of his neck again, to memorize the exact notes that stick to him like the best, most comforting dream Adam could hardly remember. He feels Nigel's fingers, just barely brushing over his jaw and ear, and startles again over it, just a little bit.

"S'okay," Nigel whispers, heartbeat roaring loudly around his skull. He rests his palm against the side of Adam's night, feels the matching flutter underneath his skin. Then, like a surgeon going in for his most intricate and complicated operation thus far, Nigel leans down the little bit it takes to kiss him.

It's a soft, almost chaste press of their lips together. Dry, from the cold night air and their own nerves wicking away moisture as if to conserve all their personal resources. Nigel pulls away, lets his hand drop to his side, and looks over to the taxi that's just begun to pull away.

"Awhh, fuck," he hisses, reaching for his pocket and starting forward, to the side.

"Nigel," Adam calls, stepping forward with him. "It's okay. It can wait. Not like— not like that." he blurts the last part out, wrangling Nigel's gaze back on him.

"Like… like last time. But, different." He adds, a flourishing blush blooming up and into his hairline when he remembers the distinctions.

Nigel sighs, like he's just been asked to the OR again after an eight-hour surgery. He steps forward again, this time standing a little taller, and bids Adam to "Close 'em." It makes Adam's face pucker up in an amused little flit, but he does indeed close his eyes again. He gets just as close as he did just before, the row of his knuckles barely brushing underneath Adam's chin to tilt it up a bit.

"Stay," Nigel murmurs, eyebrows pinching together for a moment before he leans back in. He licks his lips just before he makes contact, thrilling when Adam does so unconsciously, too. The press this time is— more familiar, less scary, and they stay standing like this, pressing careful, small kisses against the other like they're afraid of anything else.

Then, as if they're both reading each other's minds about it, their heads lean carefully to the side, mouths opening up wider as they both start to carefully deepen their kiss. Nigel is careful to keep it high-brow, consistent, but sighs out long through his nose when the tip of Adam's tongue brushes the opened seam of his lips. He pulls back for only a second, changing the angle before going to kiss Adam again, letting their tastes and all the sensations of this mingle gently, languorously, between them.

When Nigel pulls away, it's with a sense of satisfaction that he sees Adam's expression, smooth and serene before he finally opens his eyes back up They stare at each other with something like calm, something like understanding, passing between.

"Let me call the cab," he says next, almost too silent. Adam nods, crossing his arms tighter over his chest.

When Nigel calls, it takes six times for somebody to pick up.

"Awh, fuck you. You can't send somebody down? Fucking why?" He gets his ear chewed out by the dispatcher, telling him in the nicest, most customer-service way possible for him to go fuck himself.

When the calls ends, he looks over at Adam with an almost green pallor to his face. "We fucking— made them angry. Because of the first guy."

Adam makes a drawn-out sound, unhappy and worried over it. He thinks for a moment, then mumbles, "Public transportation doesn't run this late…" Then, "I guess— I could walk, I know the way back—"

"Adam, you're not fucking walking in the middle of New York at whatever-the-fuck-in-the-morning. No fucking way. You're insane," Nigel tells him, already starting to pull out a cigarette from his pack. He motions down the street a little, getting a bit away from Adam's bubble as he lights up. He hates to offer it, for obvious reasons to himself, but doesn't hesitate to say, "I have my car. Can I— ..." he pauses, constantly looping through with the hope that Adam will stop telling him yes, "drive you home?"

"Yes." Adam nods simply, as easily decided as if he weren't just talking to the man who's been obsessing over him, over this, for the past several weeks. Nigel feels the beginnings of a headache forming as he motions for them to start walking.

They're blanketed in a comfortable, amiable silence while they head in the direction of Nigel's car.

Nigel unlocks it from far away, tossing his spent cigarette to the street before he's pulling to the passenger side and opening Adam's door.

Unused to this sort of thing and feeling a bit at odds with it, Adam coughs through his thank-you before climbing in.

"No street names," is the first thing Nigel tells him when he gets into the driver's seat. He's not familiar enough with New York yet to know the total lay of the land, and doesn't want the unnecessary information of knowing exactly where Adam lives, right under his nose and too close for comfort. "Right, left, straight, or if necessary," he gives Adam a long, pausing loom, "U-turn if I get it wrong." A small, amused smile cracks up on Adam's face, and he nods once his seatbelt is buckled and he's sitting back comfortably in the leather seat.

Being in Nigel car is like being wrapped up around the essence of him, and Adam internally glows during the prospect. His cologne and smoke-smell lingers well with the scent of clean,

conditioned leather from the interior, and a little silver cross necklace hangs looped from the review mirror.

The car's stereo plays softly between the lilt of Adam's directions, who only slips up once in mentioning a street name. He lets Nigel pass the street then, and re-routes them carefully with 'right, straight for a while, you can take a left at this light here.'

The song Mary on a Cross filters through, and he pays close attention to the way Nigel drums along with the beat using his light blue lighter against his thigh.

When Nigel parks the car along a row of already parked cars (New York being, to put it lightly, a fucking traffic nightmare), he pulls it into park, stares down at his lap.

"I don't want you coming back to the bar." He admits in the quiet space between them. He leaves out all of the reasons he thinks it's a good idea. Adam's smart enough, and he got all of the answers he was looking for, he hopes.

But Adam asks, "Why?"

"Because," Nigel replies, looking over at him as if it's obvious. And it should be. It is. "You don't even like going to places like that. Don't push yourself to go just to—" he pauses, just to find me. Space, and time, and he'll get over it. Adam will too. Space, and time, and letting it lie. Let them get back to their lives, like they'd never even crashed into each other in the first place.

Then, he tries relying on his old tactics, old habits, when he says, "If my guys so much as see an Adam-Raki-Look-Alike, they're getting tossed to the curb. No ID-checks, just 'sorry' and 'keeping fucking walking.'"

"But—" Adam starts, asking, "But why?"

"Adam, you know why." Nigel grounds out, trying to keep his tone from edging on desperate. "You know why. So—" he nods, as if that's enough, "Keep your nose clean. Stay the fuck out of trouble."

They idle together for a few more moments while Adam goes through arguments in his head. Instead of voicing any of them, though, Adam just says, "Thank you for driving me home, Nigel. Please… get home safely, too."

And just like that, Adam's climbing out and walking across the street. The sun has just began to poke its unruly head above the horizonline, sending sparks of soft oranges and highlights of morning-blue against a sleepy cityscape.

He doesn't watch Adam make it inside, because he can't. He pulls the gear into drive, and gets himself lost fifteen minutes away before he pulls out his phone to map himself home. Despite the nauseating feeling of being so tired his head could crack open against his steering wheel, Nigel feels more light and possibly happier than he has in— what feels like, years.

He hopes beyond his own control that Adam feels the same way, too.

The Theory of Alternate Universes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Early into the new month, Adam is making preparations for starting his new job this coming Monday. His apartment is spotless, his laundry is all clean and put nicely away, and he stares back at his computer screen while he goes through his email.

It's an uncharacteristically warm day in the beginning of October, so Adam idles himself by working on a cherry popsicle while he organizes his folders and clicks delete on several spam emails. He finds one, though, from Facebook, that immediately catches his attention.

He opens an incognito window, typing out the entire website address to pull up one profile in particular. He hovers over the *Enter* button before hitting send, breaking apart some of his popsicle with the backs of his teeth.

He swallows the slush with a hiss, wiping his mouth on back of his thumb before scrolling through to look.

To his eminent surprise, there is a single, brand-new update on the public profile. Shock zings through him at this, then worry, as he considers the possibility of Nigel publicly outing his status as a non-dead Romanian criminal mastermind, suddenly on a walk and perusing the clamored-up street of the Park Avenue. The photo shows rows and rows of booths and white-topped awnings, of people with big bags and smiling, sunglassed faces. The New York Public Library hosted an annual street book fair every single year, of which Adam has only made it down a couple of times due to the large crowds it pulls in.

He can't sit still with this information, however. He powers off his laptop and gets to his feet, chomping and slurping the rest of his popsicle until just the stick pokes out from beneath his molars, cutting into his cheek a little as he works shoes onto both of his feet.

He makes it down there in thirty five minutes flat, almost immediately overwhelmed by the clatter, clamor, sights and smells and sounds of the busy fair. He knows exactly where that photo was taken, and he heads straight for it.

The "Travelers," a series of bronze and marble statues by the artist Bruno Catalano, is an installation that had begun just last year, and was finished before September had come and gone.

It is a commentary, he'd read, about the tearing apart of human beings, their torn-apart figures '*crossed by a great emptiness that evokes the scars of departures and separations, identities fragmented by trials and tribulations*,' he'd read from a *Patrons of Park Avenue* article.

Each of the figures represent the same or similar theme, he understands; That the future is undeniably connected to one's own roots, their background, where they come from and how

they grew up, who they became over time and life wrings you through. He walks through the this part of the park, searching aimlessly for anyone who might look even a little bit like Nigel.

And when he finally sees him, back turned as he leafs through paper-backs at a— Adam grins — science fiction set up, he doesn't hesitate to run on over. He stops just before Nigel, finally hesitating at the last moment, afraid to call out or break the spell of silence that'd come peacefully over them since last they saw each other.

He throws his apprehension to the side, however, reaching out a hand just before he calls out, "Nigel,"

He doesn't tense, but he doesn't turn around, either. He keeps on handling the book's covers, sweeping over them, one hand in his pocket and the other busy feeling the texture of fresh, unbeaten books.

Adam tries again, clearing his throat first before he repeats, "Nigel?"

He'd heard him the first time. He knew who was behind him. Every vein inside of him clogs with the chemicals used to produce relief, fear, and a curdling-sort of yearning that makes him breathless. When he feels fingers ruffle to tug the back of his shirtsleeve, then, is when he can't put it off any longer.

He turns around, and is met with the sweetest sight of Adam Raki. Daylight does so well to bring out the beauty of him. His soft, curling, fluffy hair tinging pale around the edges from the sun. His skin, bathed bright under the color of day, cheeks warming pink due to— excursion? Had he run here? Is Adam hyperventilating, or is it Nigel that's breathing loud?

"Hi, angel." is the first thing to leave his mouth.

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Nigel listens for the annoying clank of the buzzer ring through, til the front door unlatches to let him walk inside. He hoists the black swan-print canvas bag higher up on his shoulder, full of ingredients to make mocktails and other things they'd needed from the store to make dinner together.

He'd gotten hold of fresh strawberries, blackberries, lavender and rose sweeteners, tonic waters and juices and things like fresh mint and rosemary, with recipes in his head that he knows will work out well for Adam's more rigorous palette. A bushel of newspaper-wrapped flowers sits snug between these ingredients, too, and he's careful not to crush them as he holds the back gingerly away from his side.

He starts up the stairs, and listens to the *clack, clack, clack* of heels coming down the top of the steps.

With the impending feeling of *just knowing* (and having been fed the details that Beth, Adam's ex, still **lived in the same building as him**, and like, what the fuck were you even supposed to do? There's no playbook on how to respond when the absolute craziest, stupidest turn of events unfolds right before your very eyes. So, like Nigel's learned to do, he tries to take in all in stride.

When Beth and he walk passed each other on the stairs, he can tell that she doesn't recognize him one bit. They lock eyes, and she smiles on ger way past, and this impulse of Nigel's is just too great to contain.

"Hey," he watches her turn her back, head whipping around so she can stare at him, unblinking. He mimes two fingers over the front of his teeth, says, "Got something," and when she whips back around to stall on the steps, digging in her purse for her little compact mirror, Nigel is already high up on climbing the steps as silent and quick as he can. When she bares her teeth in the mirror, they're just as she'd thought they would be— clear and shiny, with not so much as a leftover piece of lettuce in between her two front teeth. She frowns then, looking behind her in confusion, but the stranger is gone already. She shrugs and just rolls her eyes, huffing and pulling her purse tight up against her body once the compact slips back inside.

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Four thirty-eight, the clock from his phone reads, and he's slipping through the front of the club before it's even opened. Music still gentles pulsatingly around each room, but the house lights are all flicked on, casting the whole building in a sobering, different kind of atmosphere that he's not quite used to yet.

When he makes it through the floor, over the back stairs the loop around into the other room, he finds a full bar that includes Nigel, Katie, Maria, Jakob, and a few other faces that he's slowly becoming familiarized with. They're all loud and whooping, laughing at something someone had said, before Katie perks up immediately and says,

"Hey Adam!"

"Hi," he grins right back, eyes darting nervously over to Nigel and to the approximation of each of their faces. It's so odd to him to be here before the floodgates have opened, a peek behind the veil of 'showbiz' he'd never really thought about getting to see. Being here now, where everything isn't so loud or so crowded, is *much* better than the alternative. Nigel saddles on up next to him, holding a sipped-upon glass of cold Sprite that has Adam's name written all over it. He presses a chaste little kiss atop his head, lets his side and shoulder bump against Nigel's during a quick little hug, and pours himself amongst the din of the loud, excitable conversation that'd been carrying on beforehand.

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When Adam rings the door-bell, he's set upon by an immediate crash of nerves. This was the first time he was visiting Nigel's home, after all. Nigel had come over to Adam's home out of general comfort for him, and honestly, he'd been scared to unpeel that layer of Nigel's, of what kind of home he might keep, as he didn't really love to be in places he wasn't familiar with. He thinks of Nigel's car, though, and the clean-leather-and-cologne smell of it, the hanging silver of the cross, the soccer ball that'd rolled along in the backseat whenever Nigel had made a right or left turn.

Now he stands, nervously shuffling away and towards the door while he waits perilously for it to open. When it does, his face flushes in relief at the beam of happiness exuding from the other man.

"Hello, gorgeous." he smiles, stepping aside to let Adam on in.

Immediately, there are so many things to look at. He takes a slow, slow spin as his eyes trail all along the walls. Art hangs from nearly every square inch, themes and figures blending together to create a wider picture. The smell of burning amber fills him up when he takes a breath, and looks over to Nigel for more prompting.

"Welcome in?" he ventures, nervousness flitting between them both like a feedback loop. Adam carefully sets his bag down near the couch, goes in to hug Nigel around the middle and bury his face below the crook of his neck. Nigel hugs back readily, sweeping hands over Adam's shoulders and squeezing where he might have tension.

"I've already started on dinner, it'll maybe be about twenty, thirty more minutes?" He checks with Adam with a glance. "Wanted to set you up here so you'd be comfortable." His eyes flick to the couch, a big brown camelback couch, wrapped in soft leather and padded with even softer blankets and pillows.

"You don't want any help?"

"Nah, I got it." He points to his little library, then, says, "You can peruse and judge my tastes, if you'd like." Adam snickers at that, knowing he'd brought his own book just in case, but sinking down to the clean floor anyway, just to take a look.

When Adam's finished whetting his curiosity, he settles himself into a comfortable corner on the couch. About mid-way through, Nigel sets up a quiet-tempo'd jazz on the record player. It sits on a high glass shelf with other bobbles, blown glass and even some interesting insects in amber that he oggles openly at.

Dinner together is exactly what Adam had expected, and his head and shoulders rock side to side happily for a moment when he sits down next to Nigel to eat. He can tell Nigel's watching him from the corner of his eye while he blows on his macaroni, expression crinkling soft and non-judgmental while Adam stims in place.

They go through some of his records after dinner, Nigel intent on washing up after Adam's left, saying "*Don't* worry about that, I got it, come over here, *get out of the kitchen*." Nigel shows him some old scores of Romanian folk music. It's not very pleasing to Adam's ears, but their laughter in between imitating the sounds of the tone and melody and instruments is enough to make both of them appreciate it.

"I don't know why I thought your home would be so different," Adam admits when they sit together on the couch. "I expected— I don't know. Maybe it's me, but my home, you know, it — I have my room covered in all of my interests, but," he explains that his dad had decorated the rest of it, years before he'd passed, and save for a few minor adjustments, he'd kept it the same. Out of familiarity, out of obligation, it didn't matter. It was nice, though, to know and to see more of Nigel spread out all around him. It felt a little, tiny bit like home.

"I also think because your office is so bare."

"It's an office," Nigel gruffs back, taking a sip on his drink. "Just never saw the point."

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The office is silent, quiet, dark, and the rooms beyond boom from the blasting of noxious music. On the desk, a shakily-taken photo sits framed, the two figures nearly blurred-out and out of focus, as if the hand that'd taken that photo was shaky at the time, but there had been no better thing to get printed and wrapped in glass and wood.

To the side of the desk, what hangs on the wall; one large, framed NASA poster, a limited-edition print of their announcement of *Artemis II* set to depart next September, along with several other frames from favorite movies, artists, blown-out coverarts from a few favorite books.

As a joke from one of the girls, a printed out piece of paper with Jacob Black and Edward Cullen from *Twilight* glares menacingly over at anyone who may sit at that desk. And Nigel fucking loves it, all of it.

Chapter End Notes

this is about it for these two! i very much appreciate everyone who's read along.

comms + kudos always appreciated, thanks very much again!)b

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